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I Work As A Healer In Another World's Labyrinth City

vol.5

by Osananajimi

Novel Updates

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Chapter 63: Biblical Character

It's now the night of the same day that the succubus was repelled. In my room at the lord's mansion, I've been absorbed in reading the Bible.

—The reason I'm here in this world.

Until now, I didn't think it would be possible to find out. I didn't have enough material to consider, so I had given up.

But now I know. In this book, there are details written about a character with the same circumstances as me.

At the moment, a victory celebration is being held in the lord's mansion over our successful repulsion of the succubus. But, so that I could read this book, I slipped away early. The saint and the lord protested and tried to hold me back, saying that I was the leading role, but I insisted on returning to my room and locked the door. In order to concentrate on reading the Bible, of course.

"S-Shiki-sama. Everyone understands that the fact that you were manipulated by the succubus was unavoidable. Lord-sama dealt with that female knight who was pointing and laughing at you by telling her she would be getting a one-month pay cut. Therefore... well, won't you cheer up and come attend the victory party?"

The saint's voice comes from the other side of the door.

...It's not like I withdrew myself into my room because I was embarrassed that so many people saw my desires being easily manipulated by the succubus. I'm not saying it didn't factor in, but that doesn't mean it was the entire reason.

"...That didn't bother me at all. I just want to read the Bible. Leave me alone for a while."

I'm barely even bothered anymore about the fact that, after staggering back and forth between the succubus and Eris for ages, I just barely returned to my senses when Yuel was about to pull down my pants. Besides, Yuel is here in this room too. I wish the saint would stop suggesting that I'd let such a minor thing get to me. The thing I'm dwelling on is what happened after that.

—Those words the saint said are still echoing in my head even now.

“Sage-sama.”

At the time, while she was clutching my hands tight, the saint clearly said that. Sage refers to that character in the Bible who sealed the evil god. I've only read a part of the Bible so far, but I was able to confirm that in terms of our “black-haired man who came from another world and has an enormous amount of mana” aspects, we coincide. And, as for him being such a ridiculously powerful person that he forced back the evil god and his apostles, I'm just getting to that part right now. From the events so far, considering my outstanding healing magic ability, to think that I'm the same type of being as that sage... it's not difficult to imagine.

“...Understood. The truth is, there is a subordinate of mine to whom I wished to introduce you... but if that is the case, I suppose it cannot be helped.”

As I'm reflecting, the saint says that.

“Subordinate...?”

...As far as I know, I'm pretty sure all of the saint's subordinates were women. Besides, I just remembered this right now, but when we were attacked by the Earth Dragon, I unknowingly treated one of the saint's subordinates in addition to the beauty contest participants. Yeah, the saint was saying something about that back when she purged the archbishop. By some chance, is it possible that said subordinate became interested in me after I gallantly saved her life with EX Heal without revealing my identity or demanding compensation?

...Whaaat, if you wanna introduce me to your subordinate or whatever, you should've mentioned such an important detail sooner.

I put strength into my legs in order to stand up and unlock the door to the room. However, I notice that Yuel has laid down to sleep with her head on my lap, and I stop. Because Yuel is making sure to stand watch over me throughout the night, she's taking a nap now. Plus she hasn't started breathing softly so she may not actually be asleep yet, and I can't risk her seeing me easily take back something I've previously said.

...Well, there's no need to hurry, right? Things have been going great with Eris

and Ruruka lately. And I'll be introduced to the saint's subordinate eventually, so I can meet her next time.

—Then from outside the room, I hear the saint's footsteps leaving.

However, those footsteps soon stop... and for some reason, return to my doorstep. And, after apparently taking some time to consider, the saint calls out to me again.

"Umm... Shiki-sama, by some chance... are you perhaps in the middle of something?"

"The middle of something?"

"The physique and skin color of Shiki-sama's slave girl companion are similar to those of the succubus... and moreover, she appears to greatly adore you, so..."

...I must admit, I did not exercise enough consideration, my deepest apologies. My knowledge of male nature is quite limited... even though your sexual desires have been enhanced by the succubus, I so rudely intruded upon your doorstep."

The saint says in a tone that actually sounds apologetic.

Is this bitch implying that she thought I would definitely bite if she offered to introduce me to her subordinate, and because I didn't that must mean I'm getting busy with Yuel? Wait, she sees me as the type of person who, when given the choice between finding out the reason for my existence in this world or meeting a woman, would always pick the woman?

...She's quite perceptive, but this time that's wrong.

I'm not venting my sexual desire that was roused by the succubus on Yuel. To begin with, it already calmed down on its own. I wish she wouldn't say such easily misunderstood things. Yuel might already be misunderstanding; her eyes are closed but her ears are rapidly twitching. Those long elven ears of hers are shaking intensely.

"Oi, don't say something that could invite a misunderstanding. I really am just reading the Bible."

"N-No, you need not hide it. We succeeded in repelling the succubus, but that does not mean we have already confirmed her demise. So that you do not suffer her manipulation again, it is imperative to sate your appetite.

...Though I say that, well, even if there is mutual consent, with a young slave girl... such behavior will not lead to favorable rumors. Though if that is indeed the case, I thought it necessary to vacate the area just to be sure."

Seriously, please don't say any more. Right now, Yuel is most likely in an unstable condition again from Eris kissing me.

—When we got back to the lord's mansion, we entered the bath together, but at that time I noticed.

In the dressing room, as she was removing her panties, Yuel was shaking her hips subtly, as if she was trying to imitate the succubus' behavior. Of course, when she saw that I didn't approach her back when I was ping-ponging between Eris and the succubus, her face was a little disappointed too. On top of that, at the victory celebration afterwards when my eyes met with Eris' and I averted them in embarrassment, the look of pessimism about the world in general in Yuel-san's eyes was a new one for me.

"...!!"

Did she hear the saint's words just now? Yuel's ears stiffen straight out, and she excitedly shoots out of bed, comes over to me, and sits on her knees in front of me. Then, with an expression that tells me she's definitely made a huge misunderstanding, she pats her head to fix her hair and corrects her sitting posture again. After that, unable to hide her tension, her body goes rigid and she looks down, occasionally casting a furtive glance up at me.

I don't know what Yuel might be thinking, but this situation is not the greatest.

"T-That's wrong! It's not like that, really! I haven't made a move on Yuel, and I'm absolutely never going to! I honestly just want to read the Bible!"

I deny it strongly. When I do, for some reason the saint's laughter leaks out.

"Is that so? I apologize for jumping to conclusions.

...Well then, I shall call upon you again tomorrow morning, so please do be ready."

After that, the saint quickly departs from in front of my room. I wonder if she believed me? But something tells me she agreed too quickly.

...Wait. By some chance, the saint may not have been thinking that I was in the middle of something with Yuel in the first place. And she was laughing when she heard my voice. Besides, that saint, back when she purged the archbishop, I'm pretty sure she said she had to pay him back in kind. There's a chance that she just came to tease me a little for bailing out of the victory celebration.

But if that's what it was then I really wish she'd cut it out. It may just be a mild tease to the saint, but if I mess up in dealing with this fidgety Yuel, one strike and I'm out. Timidly, I take a look at her.

—Over there, Yuel is looking at me with eyes full of tears and a despondent expression.

Sitting on her knees in front of me and trembling. She looks like she could cry at any moment.

"A-Absolutely... n-never... make a move... I-I knew it, someone like me... anymore... over Eris-san..."

I think back over what I just said. Oh no. Sure, I have no intention of putting my hands on the young Yuel, but saying that I never will must have crushed her hopes.

Although to be completely honest, I can't at all imagine how Yuel will look when she's grown, so it's not entirely like I misspoke. But I do know that every day without fail, Yuel always checks her breast size and measures her height when we're entering the bath, anxiously tracking her progress. All I can do now is gloss it over.

"Y-Yuel. I only meant until you grow up. Who knows what'll happen after that.

So, well... d-don't let it bother you, okay? Alright?"

For now, I try to explain. But well, Yuel should understand that I won't lay a hand on her while she's a child, so I don't think there should be a problem with this.

...But Yuel is still looking down and trembling.

"..."

And she doesn't say anything.

...No, for an instant she looks at me with a face like she wants to say something. However, after that, she quickly looks back down again.

"Y-Yuel? W-What's the matter?"

I ask, but Yuel doesn't answer. She's just hanging her head and trembling.

—Then suddenly, I notice a drop of water fall onto her knees.

At the same time, I hear a sob from her.

...She's crying. Oh man, she's seriously crying.

"Y-Yuel!?"

Oh no. This is bad. With a pitter-patter, drops of water keep falling onto her knees.

As I'm feeling bewildered, I hear Yuel's weak voice squeeze out of her throat.

"...B-Before I grow up, I'm sure that Master will... get married to Eris-san. When that happens... I know I won't have a place by Master's side anymore..."

From Yuel's mouth, the words "married to Eris" come out. Well, even though it was to save me from the succubus, Eris did just kiss me. I guess it's inevitable that Yuel would end up thinking this way.

"Eris-san is super nice, even to me. That's why... I think I want Eris-san to be happy. And Eris-san's boobs are so huge too... I know she's perfect for Master. But... but I... with Master... forever... together forever..."

Most likely, in Yuel's mind, marriage = no other women allowed by my side, not even a slave, or something close to that. Even if I get married, though, I

have no intention of sending Yuel off somewhere. Regardless of whether monogamy is common sense in society, regardless of who I get married to, in all likelihood I would keep Yuel by my side. Besides, I'm aiming for a harem in the first place, so such societal norms have nothing to do with me. For me, it's a trivial concern.

But, as far as I can tell from Yuel's appearance, for her, it's truly a massive obstacle.

"...Yuel."

Somehow, compared to the time with Ruruka, I get the feeling that Yuel is much more depressed. Maybe she's thinking that against Eris, she doesn't have even a one in a million shot of winning. Well, Eris is a woman whose unadulterated sexual charm triumphed over even the succubus who has the ability to manipulate desires. If you put it that way then yeah, I guess she doesn't have a shot.

"...Now that I think about it, I haven't told you about myself yet, huh."

That's why I need to turn Yuel's thoughts in a different direction here. I came up with this entire plan as I was reading the Bible with all my might until just now. With this, Yuel will stop crying. I'm that confident in it.

"About... Master...?"

Yuel seems perplexed by the sudden change of topic, but I keep talking.

"I'll say it again. I've kept silent about this until now, but I'm not from this world. It seems like I'm a similar existence to the character from the Bible known as the Sage."

"...I-I have always, always thought that Master is definitely an amazing person."

Yuel informs me with a solemn attitude. Albeit in a tearful voice. But she latches onto the conversation. She appears to be interested in what I'm saying.

"Have you already read chapter two of the Bible, Yuel?"

"...Yes, there were words I didn't understand, but... I've read that far."

"I haven't read past chapter two either, but the past Sage, it seems like he

could only use a special sealing magic. He apparently had next to no close-quarters combat ability. For that reason, he always had an ally at his side to protect him. Did you read about that too?"

It's written that the past Sage used special sealing magic. I don't know that much about it, but apparently it had an immense power that was enough to seal the evil god and his apostles one after the other in their prime. But, since a number of prior arrangements were necessary, it wasn't very user-friendly as an ability and his ally was always saving him from trouble in melee combat, which is what was depicted in chapter two of the Bible.

"Yes, it said that when Sage-sama was assaulted by the evil god's apostle, he had a really, really strong ally who held them off all by herself and protected Sage-sama. I couldn't read her name, but it said that when it came to swords, nobody could compare to her... I really look up to her."

So she looks up to her. That makes this easy.

"Yuel. The part you couldn't read, that wasn't her name. It was a designation."

"Designation?"

"That's right. That ally was known to the world as the Hero."

A talented swordsman who acted as a shield for the Sage during surprise attacks and melee combat. The two of them were together day and night, the Sage and the strongest swordsman alive who always protected him. According to this Bible, that's the Hero.

"This person known as the Hero, she protected the Sage at all times, and sometimes he even repelled an apostle of the evil god all by herself. Isn't that right, Yuel?"

"Yes, I think she was an amazing person."

Yuel answers, eyes still slightly downcast. I diverted the conversation from Eris, but in the end it still seems to be bothering her. That's why I'm saying this.

"Isn't that just like what Yuel does for me?"

"!?"

Yuel's eyes snap open as she looks at me. Perhaps she thought of a slave such as herself as being too far removed from someone important enough to be written about in the Bible, so she didn't make the connection.

"Yuel held off the succubus, an apostle of the evil god, and didn't let her get near me. Besides, whether it's in the labyrinth or the forest outside the city, Yuel is the one who always protects me."

When I continue, Yuel shows me a bewildered face.

"B-But, I'm not as strong as the Hero from the Bible."

"That's because Yuel is still a child. Most likely, in ten years, Yuel can absolutely become a peerless female swordsman. Whatever you put your mind to, you can accomplish it."

I mean what I'm saying. Her ability with blades is already on the level where she wouldn't lose to a knight, and Yuel has even shown an affinity with magic. For healing magic, her mana seems to have increased from being next to me, so she should be able to use Heal after a little practice. And, being able to use healing magic with basically no piety or knowledge, I'm sure she'd even be able to learn to use attack magic. And yet she's only 12. If Yuel studies for a few years from now on, she has the potential to reach even the level of the Hero from the Bible.

"Hero... to Master, am I your hero?"

"Yeah, my hero. Hero Yuel."

A slave, yet a hero. Slave Hero Yuel.

...Nah, that title's no good, huh. It's got the same nuance to it as Slave Female Knight. That'd be more appropriate for a porno book title. Hero Yuel it is.

"A-Amazing! I will try my hardest to become Master's hero!"

Hero Acknowledgement Strategy, success.

Such a joyful expression. She's not crying anymore. Looks like that stuff about Eris has slipped her mind.

"When I become strong... Hero... Master's hero..."

Yuel looks at me with sparkling eyes. Maybe she's even envisioning her future once she becomes strong. If I'm the Sage, it's true that there's a possibility that Yuel, who always sticks by my side and is already quite capable, will be called the Hero.

...However, Yuel's face quickly clouds over. After staring at the empty space next to me, she hangs her head.

Then, as if she can't hold it back, she starts to tremble again. She must have ended up imagining a bleak future for herself. It seems that for Yuel, her concerns about Eris are quite deeply ingrained.

Hero Acknowledgement Strategy, failure.

"A-Also, Yuel."

...Looks like I have no choice but to reveal my hand. I didn't want to say this due to the risk involved, but there's no helping it.

"I'm a really amazing person."

"Yes, Master is amazing."

"In society, there's a system for the sake of such an amazing person, known as a harem."

Since Yuel is sad about monogamy, I'll let her in on the fact that I'm aiming for a harem. I didn't tell her since I wasn't sure how she'd react, but now that it's come to this I can't avoid it.

"Hair rum? ...Now that you mention it, the succubus was talking about that too, I think. But I didn't really understand what it meant."

"A harem means polygamy. It's where one man takes a lot of women as his wives."

"...!? N-No way! Is such a convenient arrangement really allowed!?"

The word 'convenient' startles me for a moment, but most likely Yuel didn't say it with the meaning of convenient for me. She was likely asking if something so convenient for her own circumstances would be allowed. That's probably it.

Ordinary citizens aren't familiar with the concept of a harem. At best, it's likely just to the degree that some nobles and wealthy merchants form them. It's not surprising that a young slave like Yuel wouldn't know about them at all.

"It's allowed, naturally. Because, as you are well aware, I'm amazing."

To be perfectly honest, I don't know that Yuel will even enter my harem once she grows up. She's still a child, and I don't want to look at her in that way either. And yet, for such a pure child, such deception is necessary. Or more precisely, I don't want her to cry anymore.

"Harem..."

Yuel murmurs in a daze.

"Harem, a harem!! Amazing, amaziiing! A harem is amazing!"

After that, Yuel's expression immediately brightens, and she starts skipping around joyously.

H-Huh? This reaction from Yuel might be better than when I recognized her as a hero.

...I tried my hardest to come up with that idea, though.

"I always thought that if Master got married, you couldn't be together with any other women!"

Well yeah, usually that's how it would be. There's no way I could say "I'm marrying you but I'm gonna keep sleeping together with this slave girl every night". At the very least, unlike now we'd have to be in separate bedrooms.

"I'll go tell Eris-san and Ruruka-san too! This way everyone, everyone can be happy!"

I reflexively grab Yuel's shoulder to stop her from running out of the room.

"W-Wait, Yuel! It's fine if you don't tell Eris and the others! T-That's, well... look, Yuel didn't know this, but among adults, it's totally natural! You don't need to specifically mention it to them!"

Maybe because she's a kid, Yuel accepted it without resistance, but I don't

think that Eris or Ruruka will approve it so quickly. The fact that I'm plotting a harem was almost discovered. It's going to be revealed eventually, but the time isn't ripe yet. In order for them to accept it, I need to raise their affection levels more and more.

"...Is that so?"

"T-That's right. Listen, Yuel. Everybody thinks it's obvious, so you don't have to go out of your way to mention it, okay?"

...I ended up lying again on the spur of the moment, but I'm sure it'll be fine.

"Understood, Master.

...If by some slim chance the succubus comes back, I'll repel her without fail! Like Hero-sama from the Bible, I'll definitely protect Master! I'll work hard so I can stay by Master's side forever and ever!"

Yuel smiles and continues to clench her fists tightly. Her beaming smile makes it hard to believe she was crying nonstop just earlier. Perhaps because I emphatically acknowledged her as a hero, she seems to be in extremely high spirits. Although the knights intend to keep protecting me here in this mansion until they can clearly confirm the succubus' death, so Yuel doesn't particularly need to try that hard.

But well, I guess there's no harm in Yuel remaining vigilant. I'll keep an eye on her to make sure she doesn't go overboard, and spend some time in the safety of the lord's mansion.

Chapter 64: Enticement

In a warm and unpleasant sweat, I open my eyes. The room is still dim. It looks like I woke up extremely early.

"Good morning, Master."

"Yeah... morning."

When I get up, Yuel is standing beside the window. She's awake even at a time like this? Apparently she really has been remaining vigilant for an attack by the succubus while I'm asleep.

"Aren't you tired?"

"I took a nap beforehand, so I'm fine."

Most likely, Yuel is thinking that if the succubus does attack, she'll come through the window. The window is shut tight, and Yuel is glancing outside through it. But, maybe because summer is approaching, the air is stuffy and it's unsurprisingly hot. I walk up to Yuel, give her head a light pat, and open the window.

I peer through the open window, and the sun hasn't quite started to rise yet. As I thought, I woke up too early. I'm pretty sure the saint said yesterday that she'd visit my room early in the morning, but given the time, she must not have come by yet.

"Hm...? That's..."

As I'm gazing outside through the window, I suddenly spot a silhouette. It appears to be having a conversation of some sort with several of the knights acting as guards.

When I take a closer look— it's a woman.

Long, glossy hair that's a striking, deep red color. Wearing a dress with lots of exposure around the open chest region. And her tits are huge. A sensual-looking woman in her early twenties.

"...That person, she's been trying to get into this mansion for a while. But the

knights don't seem to want to let her in, so I've been hearing them argue for a long time."

As I'm gazing at that beauty, Yuel informs me.

...The fact that the knights aren't letting her pass means that she's someone the lord doesn't want to allow inside his mansion. Well, most likely she belongs to an antisocial organization, or is connected to one, something along those lines. Even her tits are antisocially avoiding each other, so that's probably it.

"Why so early, though... well, not like it has anything to do with me."

I'm interested in the buxom beauty, but there's this feeling that if I stick my neck out it'll cause trouble. I'll just keep reading the Bible until the saint comes to my room.

As I'm thinking about it— suddenly, the woman's eyes meet mine. Then her expression lights up and she starts waving her hands at me.

"Master, that person is waving."

"She sure is."

The woman is waving her hand energetically, attracting my attention. Looks like she has some sort of business with me. But from the moment I saw her arguing with the knights, I knew it would cause trouble if I went over. I'll ignore her.

"Master, that person, her dress is waving around where here boobs are."

"It sure is."

The buxom babe, in order to purposefully create a gap between the dress material and her skin, is pinching her dress and pulling it apart. Maybe she's feeling hot. My gaze is drawn in a bit, but no, going down there would not be good. I need to wait here in this room for the saint to come.

"Master, that person, her thighs are peeking out through the slits in her dress."

"They sure are."

The beauty tugs on her skirt, exposing her bare legs underneath. Her white

skin is radiant. It kinda feels like she's doing it on purpose.

...Could that possibly be her trying to invite me out?

But if that's what it is, it's a shallow attempt. I'm a man who managed to withstand the temptation of that apostle of the evil god, the succubus, by the skin of my teeth. There's no way a man like me would be so easily lured out by a mere slightly lewd big-breasted...

"M-Master. That person, she's crossing her arms and pushing up her breasts... t-they're jiggling."

I hear a bit of a quiver within Yuel's voice.

"T-They sure are. Look at 'em jiggle."

They jiggled. That beauty is making those huge tits of hers jiggle. I can really see her tits shaking and swaying through the wide-open neckline of her dress. Jiggle jiggle. They're jiggling. Since it's a dress, she may not be wearing anything underneath. They're jiggling all over the place.

I can't move my eyes away. Even though there's no sign at all that magic's being invoked like with the succubus, I'm being drawn in by all that jiggling. Yuel is likewise transfixed on them, with a look that's a mixture of grief and dismay.

This is no good. I'm gonna be lured out easily. I'm gonna feel like going to the mansion's gate to get a closer look at those heaving honkers.

—But even I have a sense of rationality. If I go readily here, I wouldn't put it past Yuel to harbor doubts about her master's human nature. I strain my meager amount of reason— and succeed in closing my eyes.

With the visual information cut off, my rationality surpasses my instincts. The jiggling that's seared onto my eyes gradually fades away.

...I'm okay now.

—And yet. I may have closed my eyes, but Yuel did not.

"Ah, aaahhh! That person, she started to bounce up and down! Th...they're

shaking like crazy... like b-boing, boing! They're going boing-boing, Master!"

—Yuel abruptly blurts out in surprise.

Are they bouncing that much? Yuel's tone of voice is nearly a shriek. Then, as if she wants to share the spectacle with me, she pulls on my sleeve as well to get my attention.

"A-Amazing... Master, it's amazing... d-doesn't it hurt her boobs to go boing-boing so much...? A-Aren't they heavy...?"

Since Yuel is in a daze from the boing-boing spectacle, she most likely hasn't noticed that her master is clenching his eyes shut. She doesn't seem to have realized why I'm closing them, either.

"Amazing... it's boing-boing. Boing-boing. They're going boing-boing. S-Someday, will I have such big...?"

Sadness, envy, awe, curiosity. The complex mixture of emotions in Yuel's voice is unwittingly communicating to me just how shocking that spectacle is to her. Before I realize it, my tightly-shut eyes are opening.

...

.....

"...Yuel, it seems like that person has some business with me. There was just a, what would you call it, a serious affair with the revival of the succubus. As she's trying to contact me so insistently, I can't dismiss the possibility that she came to visit over serious business that could influence the future of this city."

Why don't we head down for a bit and check it out?"

"H-Hello there, Sage-sama..."

"S-Sage-sama, why are you here!?"

When I go over to the mansion gate with Yuel, the knights on guard notice and greet me.

"Ah, it looked like there was some sort of dispute going on, so I was concerned."

In that manner, I walk up to the buxom babe. When I do, the big-breasted beauty behaves like her breasts are bothering her (was making them boing-boing a little painful to them?) and opens her mouth.

"Black hair, and a dark elf slave. As I thought, you must be Shiki-sama.

...I knew you would come for me."

Then the big-breasted beauty smiles when she sees Yuel, who draws close by my side. Just as I suspected, she seems to have some business with me.

"Yeah, so what are you here for?"

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance. I am Marianna, the daughter of the head of the Slave Merchant Union. I have come today to offer my greetings to Shiki-sama."

The beauty before me introduces herself, and makes a deep bow. The daughter of the head of the Slave Merchant Union. The merchandise they deal in is *that*, but she's still the daughter of the head of a merchant association. Unexpectedly, she's someone with a solid identity.

...But I can't think of any reason for her to come greet me. I wonder why it's so necessary for the daughter of a merchant union to meet me, to the extent that she'd go that far to ardently appeal to me? As I'm feeling perplexed,

"O-Oi, what are we supposed to do in a situation like this?"

"We were told not to let anyone pass, but to think that Sage-sama would come here... should we stop him?"

"N-No, I heard that Sage-sama is extremely fond of women... yesterday, the knight that offended Sage-sama supposedly got her pay cut."

"Oi oi, seriously...?"

from behind, I can hear the knights discussing in whispers. I'm not the one who handed out that punishment. But it looks like the sudden appearance of the existence known as the Sage is too much for the knights to know how to handle things. While the knights are still trying to figure out how to deal with me, the beauty in front of me, Marianna, advances the conversation.

"The previous archbishop, D'arnaud-sama, paid exceptional consideration to our Slave Merchant Union... consequently, as a candidate for the next archbishop, we would like Shiki-sama to give some consideration to our ongoing partnership in the event that you become the next archbishop."

"...Consideration?"

I don't really get it. I wonder if she means giving preferential treatment with EX Heal to injured slaves or something? When I tilt my head, the woman in front of me, who introduced herself as Marianna, takes a step towards me. Then, as if seeking a handshake, she takes my right hand.

"Shiki-sama is extremely fond of women. Moreover, you appear to be unopposed to the existence of slaves. I do believe you will find building a relationship with us to be mutually beneficial."

—As she says that, Marianna guides my hand to her huge breasts. She attaches my hand to one of them and places her own hand on top of it. Then, as if massaging her own breast, she begins moving her hand. Of course, between her hand and her breast, my hand is still there.

"Mmh... by partnership, I mean establishing a friendly relationship with Shiki-sama by any means necessary. As we are a worldwide organization, we should be able to accommodate Shiki-sama preferentially with beautiful women of all the varied races as well."

Putting on a rough breathing act, Marianna offers that.

With her hand atop mine, Marianna makes it rub her breast even more forcefully. That's right, rubbing her huge, soft breast. She forcefully makes me rub her giant tit with nothing but a single layer of dress material in the way. Even though I'm not moving my hand at all right now, the sensation is as if I were massaging it.

This is bad.

I feel like I'm completely falling into a trap. And it's really bad. The softness is rapidly filling up my head.

"Additionally... if Shiki-sama desires it, I will carry out any order whatsoever for you? If it's for Shiki-sama, the Sage and a promising archbishop candidate,

your wish is my command."

She whispers sweet words into my ear. With those words, the delicate balance between my rationality and my instinct utterly collapses.

It's making me want to become friendly. I don't really understand why she's suddenly making me rub her breast, but it's making me want to become very friendly with the buxom babe in front of me.

...Most likely, if she asks me for a "favor" at this point, my non-functioning brain will agree to anything without really considering the details. But even though I realize it, that rationality simply melts away within my senses.

"If it's for Shiki-sama's sake, I will do anything."

—And the instant I hear those words, I see the image of Eris superimposed over this big-breasted beauty in front of me.

...My memories from yesterday are revived. With the words "I will do anything" as the trigger, that scene I was trying not to remember plays back in my head. That's right, back during the succubus battle, what happened right after Eris told me she'd do whatever I wanted...

Sure, the buxom babe in front of me is good too, but... I'm pretty sure I felt the happiest when my head was buried in Eris' chest. In a mere moment, my head cools off. And the first thing it thinks about is the fact that Yuel is next to me.

...I glance over at her.

"..."

She's expressionless. With a blank face, Yuel is looking up at my hand as it rubs the chest of this beautiful woman. Is it because I announced the harem to her? She's not getting all teary-eyed like usual. But she's staring poker-faced from point-blank range at my hand as it massages this beauty's massive melon. Her emotions are unreadable.

—Suddenly, I notice something terrible. Yuel is holding a knife. The naked blade is glinting in the sunlight as Yuel grips the dangerous weapon in her

hands. Making no expression whatsoever.

...Wait, calm down. This is probably *that*

. Since I was suddenly approached by someone I'm meeting for the first time, she's likely holding the knife so she can immediately deal with even the unlikeliest of unexpected situations as my guard. But when Yuel makes such an expressionless face while holding a drawn blade, there's an indescribable intensity to her.

F-For now, I'll get away from this Marianna or whoever woman. A-And I'm setting a bad example, too.

"I-I'm not that enamored with women... t-t-that's not true. D-Doing such things at our first meeting is t-troublesome for me."

Then, so that she won't approach me again, I bite back my heartbreak and utter some words of refusal. When I do, Marianna momentarily glances behind me.

"Oh my, I've been rejected. Well then... I will excuse myself for today. By all means, let us meet again, Shiki-sama."

After that she bows deeply and departs from the gate. It was a dangerous situation, but I managed to get through it somehow.

...But I get the feeling that, at that last moment, Marianna wasn't looking at me.

She was looking at something behind me. What was it? And, when I turn around,

the saint is there.

Chapter 65: Structure of Slavery

"Shiki-sama, who was that person leaving just now?"

The saint asks when I turn around to face her.

"T-The daughter of the head of this city's Slave Merchant Union; her name is Marianna, apparently."

I was curious when I saw her arguing with the knights so I came to check it out, and before I knew it the beautiful woman was making me rub those giant tits of hers.

...And it's not like I was particularly obligated to wait patiently in my room for the saint to come by; plus I don't need her permission to rub a hot lady's rack.

But... I can't look the saint directly in the face. Well yeah, that's because of course I feel some guilt. Or should I say, I'm feeling nothing but guilt.

"...It would seem that the intel about Shiki-sama has already leaked outside. They must have already ascertained the fact that Shiki-sama is extremely weak to women..."

I thought she'd say something to me, but the saint puts her hand over her mouth like she's lost in thought, and calmly mutters that.

"I-I'm not extremely weak to women, so..."

Since we're in front of Yuel I deny it just in case, but the saint isn't listening. She just keeps tapping her finger, looking like she's pondering something.

"...Shiki-sama, are you aware of how a slave comes to be?"

Then the saint abruptly blurts that out. After that, not waiting for a reply from me, she continues.

"In this present era of stability where prisoners are not captured through war, the primary reason that slaves are produced is poverty."

"Poverty?"

The way that slaves are made. Now that she mentions it, Yuel told me the reason that she became a slave. I'm pretty sure she said the orphanage where she lived went bankrupt, so she was sold off to cover their debt.

"The former archbishop, D'arnaud, greatly restricted the budgets of institutions such as orphanages, intentionally adding to the number of destitute people. As a result, the people who were rendered penniless and the homeless orphans had no other option but to become slaves. As the number of slaves increased, the slave merchants profited. And the archbishop received a portion of those gains as his reward, further lining his own pockets... simply put, that was their arrangement."

"Ah, so the "consideration" that woman named Marianna or whatever was talking about... that's what it meant?"

I wondered what the saint's point was, but apparently she's explaining why Marianna came here to contact me. If there are more poor people, they become slaves voluntarily in order to keep on living, or they're sold off to cover debt, or they're pressed into slavery when their hardships lead them to commit crimes. Which means that from the slave merchants' side, it's ideal for the archbishop of the church to be stingy with money and continue forcibly exploiting the poor.

...In that case, my predecessor D'arnaud must have been quite the magnificent archbishop as far as the slave merchants were concerned.

"To slave merchants, the archbishop who monopolizes the local welfare is an important figure who can greatly influence their future business. I was certainly expecting them to contact you... but by no means did I anticipate that it would be this soon. That they were allowed to contact you... was my blunder."

The saint grimaces like she's ashamed at the naivete of her thinking. I kinda sensed it already, but this girl has a strong sense of responsibility. Although I wish she wouldn't worry so solemnly about me rubbing a beautiful woman's tits. This guilt is killing me.

"From now on, there may be further temptation from beautiful women who are aiming at you, Shiki-sama. But at the very least, I beg of you, please do not

be deceived by women connected to the slave merchants and end up becoming their pawn. I shall consider countermeasures."

Then, she gives me a warning. But, well, I have no intention of letting that happen. If it did, as far as Eris is concerned, it likely wouldn't end just with scorn. And after all, I don't have the hobby of stealing money from orphans in the first place.

"Y-Yeah, got it."

When I acknowledge her, the saint bows her head in relief. She's making a face like her shoulders can't handle the burden.

"Well, let us set that aside."

However, the saint immediately changes her expression. Seems like she still has something to say.

...The saint takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, gazing intently into my eyes.

Now that I really take a good look at her face, she definitely deserves all the praise she gets about her beauty. And as I'm staring at the saint like this, for some reason she abruptly stands on her tiptoes. Then she wraps both of her arms around the back of my head.

"O-Owah!?"

—And she hugs my head tightly. In one motion, she brings my head to her chest and tenderly presses me into it.

"Gh...!"

I hear Yuel emit a gasping noise, from her throat clenching in surprise.

"S-Saint-sama!?"

The nearby knights are also astonished at the saint's behavior.

"O-Oi, what exactly are you...!?"

Of course I'm surprised as well. I thought we were having a serious conversation just now about the connection between the slave merchants and the archbishop, but before I know it she's hugging my head and pressing it into

her chest. I'm happy about it, more or less, but more so strongly confused. I don't have the slightest clue what this girl is up to.

"How is it? Has your pulse quickened?"

"N-No, not really..."

In my overly bewildered state, I end up answering her question honestly. I was surprised, but I'm not excited. There's a nice smell wafting over to me, but I can feel her rib cage bonking into my forehead. And grinding against it kinda hurts. Plus I was just rubbing Marianna's massive mammary earlier, so to be honest this really isn't doing much for me.

"...I see."

Along with the robotic tone of the saint's voice, I can hear a sound like she's grinding her teeth. I feel a turbulent atmosphere and look at the saint's face... and when our eyes meet, she smiles sweetly. But I definitely heard her grinding her teeth, and her voice just now definitely sounded tumultuous. No doubt about it, her facial expression and her inner thoughts don't match at all. This lady is a bit scary.

Then, muttering "In that case it cannot be helped... everyone has different taste in women, I suppose.", the saint releases my head.

"N-Nonetheless... h-how about this?"

Then for her next move, she gently takes my hand, and slowly guides it.

"O-Oi!?"

Onto her chest. But she doesn't just pull my hand to her chest.

...She slips it beneath her clothes. She guides my hand under her clothes, onto her bare breast. I thought she was completely flat, but touching it directly, there's just a little something there. It's supple.



"S-Saint-sama!? W-What in god's name are you doing!?"

One of the knights who's been watching the whole scene can't hold back his outcry.

"..."

And Yuel is silently staring transfixed at my hand.

"S-Shiki-sama, how is it?"

However, the saint disregards both the knight and Yuel, and questions me. Even if she asks my opinion, I haven't the slightest clue about the meaning behind her eccentric behavior.

"Is your heart not pounding? Are you not in the mood to push me down and make babies with me?"

As expected, she's averting her eyes as if she might be embarrassed, but both her words and her actions are radically extreme. What the hell is up with her? No, I did say "I'm not excited" so I can understand what brought on this recklessness, but I wonder why she went down this road in the first place.

"The next time you are tempted by the succubus or a beautiful woman like the one earlier, if I am nearby, won't you choose me instead?"

"A-Ahh... I get it, t-that's what this is about."

When I hear the word 'succubus', I finally comprehend. I mean, now that I actually think about it that's the only thing it could've been. Most likely, the saint must have been confirming whether or not she could become, in a certain sense, a "war potential" in opposition to the succubus.

...This saint really puts her body on the line. Although if we're gonna talk about countermeasures against the succubus, it'd be fine to just keep someone like Eris or Ruruka near me at all times, so it shouldn't be necessary for the saint herself to go out of her way to do such things. In my wildest dreams, I never expected the saint to go this far. And yet, although I feel guilty that she's going this far for me,

"But you can't rival the succubus. That's on a whole different level."

to say nothing of Marianna, even Eris' "I will do whatever you want" offer was just barely enough against the temptation of the succubus. It's probably

impossible for the saint in the first place. She's hopelessly lacking in the chest department.

"E-Even if I go this far, is it hopeless for me...?"

This time, the voice the saint emits sounds truly heartbroken. To get barely any reaction after going this far might have been a considerable shock to her. Well, she is a beauty and all. And I got to touch the bare breast of an important person with the title of saint, no less.

But for me, titties are greater than titles. Since it was after I rubbed those bodacious boobs, in the end I couldn't hide my dissatisfaction.

"If the succubus appeared somewhere with just me and Philine, without a doubt I'd be swept away by the succubus' temptation. I can guarantee that."

But if I told the saint something suitable here to protect her feelings and got abducted as a result, humanity would be in trouble. My wide-range healing is way too compatible with the succubus' horde of manipulated monsters.

And Yuel is currently here too, not to mention the nearby knights. It's not like I'll be kidnapped that easily. But just in case, I'll properly convey my impressions.

"I see..."

The saint's head droops a little. Since Eris was able to get me back from the succubus, the saint may have been thinking that she should be able to as well. But to be honest, the saint's chest isn't much different from Yuel's. No, Yuel's might even be bigger. The saint is flat beyond hope.

However, after letting out a single deep sigh, the saint soon switches to a serious expression.

"I must say, this is somewhat irksome... a night has passed, and yet the succubus' whereabouts are still unknown. She will require time to assemble more monsters, so the probability of an immediate repeat attack ought to be low, but we cannot discount the possibility that she remains lurking within the vicinity of this city."

"I see... but her leg was definitely hit by the Earth Dragon's breath, so couldn't

she also just be a statue by now?"

"Indeed, however... judging from the battle thus far, an apostle of the evil god possesses a physical body that is far tougher than we had surmised. The petrification may not proceed at the same rate that it does with people. I have heard that, compared to humans, those monsters that have a strong vitality are abnormally resistant to petrification and poison. We cannot disregard the possibility that the same is true of the succubus."

Now that she mentions it, even though the succubus got fairly trounced by the dragon, she was okay. Even when she got smacked into the wall or the ground by its tail, she was still relatively lively. Although she did seem to be in pain. But if she had been an ordinary human, those powerful attacks would have turned her into mincemeat.

"...Ultimately, the better option seems to be to solidify Shiki-sama's environs."

Then the saint mutters that and claps her hands peremptorily. At the same time, a small figure comes hopping down from the roof of the mansion, and stops beside the saint.

"Philine-sama, how may I serve you?"

The identity of the figure is a beast-eared girl I sorta remember. Her age looks to be around the same as Yuel's.

"Shiki-sama, this girl is Astel, my escort. Shiki-sama's slave is excellent, but it would seem that she has not received training as an escort... forgive my impertinence, but while I am here in this mansion, let Astel here teach her the techniques of an escort."

"Escort techniques?"

I don't know what "escort techniques" is referring to, but, well, I guess it wouldn't hurt for Yuel to learn them. I take a glance in Yuel's direction, and she seems eager. She looks into my eyes and nods, firmly clenching both fists.

"...M-Me?"

But as for the kid named Astel, she seems a bit dissatisfied. What's more, it looks like she's glaring at Yuel a little. Oh wait, I only just remembered now, but

this kid is the saint's spy who Yuel mistakenly chased around back at the orphanage.

...I get the feeling that she hates Yuel quite a bit. Something tells me this is going to get rather troublesome. It'd be great if they don't bicker or anything, though.

As I'm fretting, a knight rushes over from outside the mansion. Then, when he locates the saint, he stops in front of her and reports.

"S-Saint-sama, the succubus has appeared in the city of Crusell!"

Chapter 66: Special Training

"I-In the city of Crusell!? Has she managed to assemble monsters and plot an attack so quickly!? W-What is the damage to the city!?"

The saint raises a shocked voice. The succubus has no combat ability by herself. It should take a few days for her to assemble a force of thousands of monsters in order to attack a city. And just yesterday, she attacked this labyrinth city. For sure, this is way too soon for another attack.

"O-Oi, isn't Crusell pretty close to here? Won't it be bad if we don't send reinforcements?"

This labyrinth city was unharmed thanks to reinforcements from nearby as well as my existence, but I remember Crusell being a smaller-scale town than this one. If it received an attack from the succubus without even gathering reinforcements, it would likely fall easily. If they're still able to resist, we need to head over there with reinforcements as fast as we can.

"N-No, that is not the case! I-It's a misunderstanding! It's not that the succubus brought monsters to attack the town!"

However, when the knight sees our surprise, he hastily corrects his statement.

"T-Then... what is the meaning of this?"

"The succubus appeared by herself before the bishop of Crusell... wanting him to heal her leg."

In response to the saint's enquiry, the knight speaks with some difficulty.

"...Her leg? And in front of the bishop, unaccompanied? My apologies, but could you provide more details?"

"Yes. The succubus initially tried to manipulate Crusell's Bishop-sama using her ability in order to get her petrification treated, but with his honest and virtuous character, it seems she was unable to influence him in the slightest. The succubus attempted several methods, from seduction to using clever words to invite him to join the evil god's forces, but Crusell's Bishop-sama wasn't moved and rejected her. In the end the succubus clung to Bishop-sama,

showing him her leg petrified up to the ankle while repeatedly sobbing and begging for her life like "It's a once in a lifetime request, so please heal meee! At this rate I'm gonna dieeee!" and so on."



"An apostle of the evil god was begging for her life...?"

When I hear the knight's report, all of the tension drains from my body. I thought I needed to go back them up as soon as possible, but it sounds like that'll be completely unnecessary. Seems like she's just been running around trying to get her leg treated. And furthermore, she's at her wit's end to the point of ignoring her shame and forsaking her reputation.

"...I-Indeed, the bishop of Crusell should not be able to use anything beyond High Heal in the first place, though... What did Bishop-sama do after that?"

"Apparently he called soldiers over and they tried to capture the succubus, but she just barely got away."

"The ideal approach, and yet... is that so, she was able to escape?"

When she hears that the succubus got away, the saint bites her nails.

...Man, the succubus' image is steadily crumbling. In the Bible it was written that at times she moved in secret and at times she crushed cities from the frontlines, throwing mankind into disarray and carving out huge chunks of their territory. That she was an apostle who could certainly be called the right hand of the evil god. But like this she's just just a perverted young girl with a shitty personality.

"The succubus sure sounded more impressive in the Bible."

"...Certainly, neither the number of monsters she manipulates nor her strategic nature are up to the level described in the Bible..."

The saint picks up on the surprise in my voice. However, she makes a sullen face as she speaks.

"Yet we mustn't be careless. In biblical times, the succubus once created internal strife within humanity, causing the slaughter of many human beings without lifting a finger herself. Seeing through the weaknesses in people's hearts and cleverly taking advantage of them to win people over to her side, that more than anything is her true strength. It is most disconcerting. Although presently her body is weakened, and it seems she is powerless against those humans with no openings, such as the bishop of Crusell..."

The saint glances at me as she says that. Is she implying that someone like me, full of openings and brimming with worldly desires, absolutely needs to watch out?

...Now that she mentions it, the succubus saw through my personality just from me gazing at her defenseless chest a little bit, and came to seduce me. Even after Eris intervened, the succubus tempted me with honeyed words like "If you join the evil god's camp I'll make you a harem with all the beautiful women in the world", using my true feelings to try to get me to betray humanity. She likely doesn't just use her own body as bait, she tried to make me turn traitor by giving me a glimpse of what I desire. I guess that being capable of such "negotiation" is why she's known as an apostle.

"And yet, if that is the case, there is a possibility that the succubus will appear at the churches in other cities. I shall entreat the surrounding cities to fortify the defenses around their churches and eminent priests."

After giving a concise message to the knight, the saint seems to think about something a little, and soon speaks to me.

"There are currently no priests in the vicinity capable of using EX Heal other than myself and Shiki-sama. If the succubus knew this, she would invariably return to attack this labyrinth city. Particularly, there is the justification that Shiki-sama is the Sage, and given the fact that she was able to easily manipulate you once before, the possibility that she will target you is extraordinarily high"

It's extraordinarily high, huh?

"I must speak with Lord-sama immediately concerning the defenses of this mansion and our coordination with the nearby cities. I shall prepare countermeasures, but please exercise adequate caution.

...Well then, Astel, you have your instructions."

Then, leaving the rest up to the young dog-eared girl known as Astel, the saint hastily returns to the lord's mansion.

...Wait, was this dog-eared girl the subordinate she wanted to introduce me to? Just from her age alone... of course her chest is completely flat. So much for getting my hopes up a tiny bit.

After the saint goes inside the mansion, Astel makes a pouty expression and sighs.

"...You got in my way at the orphanage, didn't you."

Then she glances at Yuel and addresses her in a critical tone of voice.

...Looks like she still holds a grudge over being chased around at the orphanage after all. She's around the same age as Yuel so her animosity doesn't have much impact, but her feelings of anger are well evident. She's puffing out her cheeks and going "Hmph!".

"That was an extremely important operation to expose the true intentions of that Archbishop D'arnaud. Thanks to your interference, Saint-sama got really mad at me afterwards."

She got really mad, huh? Sure, the existence of Yuel may very well have obstructed the saint's operation or whatever, but at the time, Yuel didn't know that Astel was an observer on the saint's side. I mean, in the beginning even I didn't think that the saint was an ally. As far as Yuel is concerned, telling her that she should have been considerate of Astel when she noticed her is unreasonable.

"U-Um, I-I'm sorry..."

"You were sneaking around on the roof of the orphanage; Yuel was only thinking that you might have been aiming for me. She didn't do anything wrong. The problem was that archbishop and I just happened to run into each other at the orphanage by chance, that's all."

Yuel apologized, but just in case, I'll admonish Astel as well. It'll bug me if she blames Yuel too much over this matter. And even if she criticizes Yuel here, it's not like Yuel can make use of that in the future. The next time a suspicious person approaches me, I'd prefer that Yuel try to remove them, seeing as how she's my guard. If we're going to make the best of our mistakes, the lesson here is most likely that I need to teach Yuel how to properly differentiate between an enemy and an ally.

Well, it doesn't seem like there's much point in me telling Astel that, though. She said that the saint was furious, so she probably wants to blame Yuel who's around the same age as the cause of her failure. Plus she likely can't criticize me, now that I'm being called the sage. I bet she'll reject my argument.

However, Astel doesn't lash back against my remarks. Rather, her mouth hangs open like she was taken by surprise.

"E-Even though I was on top of the roof, you noticed me...? Y-You didn't just climb up onto the roof by chance...?"

After that, she hangs her head, grumbling about something in a small voice, seemingly depressed.

"I was discovered... I was discovered by an amateur..."

...I wonder if, by some chance, she was confident in her ability as a spy to hide her presence? As a spy who works for the saint, I suppose it's not good for her to be discovered by an amateur, much less a child such as Yuel. She's staring stupefied at Yuel as if it's a huge shock to her, that kind of atmosphere.

She may have the title of the saint's spy, but mentally she seems to act her age.

"Oi, aren't you here in order to teach Yuel your escort techniques?"

But it's gonna be bothersome if she just stands around in a daze like this forever. For the time being, I try calling out to her.

"T-That's right...! Y-You, fight me! Before I train you, I'll measure your abilities first!"

When I do, Astel is taken aback and immediately recovers her composure. Then, in a strong tone, she faces Yuel and challenges her. That was a fast switch.

...But her way of recovering is a little off. Somehow it's like she's trying to defeat Yuel to prove her own merit, there's that kind of feel to it. I wonder if this is okay?

"A fight, is it?"

I wasn't sure if I should stop it, but when Yuel hears Astel's words, her eyes begin to sparkle. You wanna fight her, Yuel-san?

...Well, after all, she doesn't have any experience fighting a child around the same age. I'm kinda interested to see the extent of Yuel's ability, too. Astel received training as the saint's spy. Yuel is strong, but I can easily predict that Astel is stronger than she appears as well.

"I have as much training in the fundamentals of interpersonal combat as a knight. I'd never lose to an amateur elf like you, who's only ever fought monsters!"

Astel takes out a wooden practice sword and throws it to Yuel. She seems considerably self-confident.

"Yuel, do whatever you want, just make sure not to cause injury. It may be a wooden sword, but stop right before you get a hit."

"Yes, Master!"

Just to make sure, I remind her "safety first", and Yuel replies enthusiastically. She's hopping up and down, warming up. She doesn't have enough there to go boing-boing, but her chest seems full of motivation all the same.



"...!"

Astel glares at Yuel with a harsh expression. What's she glaring for now?

Wait... I meant it for both Astel and Yuel, but to Astel, it might have looked like I was coordinating with Yuel in advance. Like "Kukuku, my escort Yuel. Astel or whoever over there may be a pushover, but don't go overboard". Looking at it from her perspective, did it seem like we were looking down on her? I also get the feeling she's being too sensitive, though. Plus there's the fact that they're around the same age, so I wonder if she sees Yuel as a rival?

But, well, having a rival isn't a bad thing. There's nothing wrong with Yuel getting stronger, so let's have her train as much as she can without getting hurt.

Chapter 67: Sleeping Powder

A few minutes later.

...Somehow or other, I had a feeling it would end up like this. But I also predicted that there would be trouble if it did.

The garden of the lord's mansion. A single no-contact match with wooden swords.

—The result was... Yuel standing over a fallen Astel, holding a wooden sword to her throat.

"K-Kuuuhhhhh..."

Astel, down on her butt, glares intensely at Yuel.

...You ended up winning, Yuel-san. You ended up winning against the sage's spy who has the same amount of interpersonal combat training as a knight, Yuel-san.

"Master! I won!"

Yuel approaches me jubilantly. Then, as if wishing to be petted, she holds her head in an easily accessible spot and starts wiggling it. I'm worried about how Astel will react, but I'll pet her anyway.

"Unbelievable..."

Staring at Yuel bashfully getting her head petted, Astel makes a facial expression that no child ever should. Eyes half-covered in tears, biting her lower lip, glaring furiously at Yuel.

...So it ended up like this after all, huh? I wanted Yuel to win, but it was clear that this would happen if she did. I mean, as the saint's escort, Astel seemed to be highly conscious of her professional status and all.

...But it's not like I can't understand Astel's feelings. Astel most likely beats

Yuel by a mile when it comes to combat techniques. And yet she completely lost in terms of specs; that's the kind of match-up it was.

Astel's attacks mixed with clever feints were completely overcome by Yuel's reflexes. Even when she deftly moved into Yuel's blind spots, Yuel twitched her ears to pinpoint Astel's location and continued accurately swinging the wooden sword towards her. Yuel ended up covering the difference in technique with her body's ability. Imagining the potential once Yuel has properly honed her combat techniques, my expectations for her future prospects have risen, but this result is a little cruel for Astel.

Or maybe I should ask, with Astel being so vexed, will she even teach Yuel her combat techniques properly? Even under normal circumstances she has an attitude like she hates Yuel. I'm concerned about Astel's mental state.

Even from the perspective of the saint, this result was most likely beyond her expectations when she gave Astel her orders. If Yuel can win against the spy used by the saint, she'll most likely trample over ordinary enemies. Surely, unless it's one of a handful of big shots who are stronger than Astel or have skin too hard for her knife to penetrate like the Armor Ogre, nobody could win against Yuel.

But such things probably don't matter to Astel. No matter how strong Yuel may be, as the saint's spy, Astel lost to someone of the same age, and furthermore someone with barely any combat training. As far as she's concerned, it would invariably be humiliating. She's glaring at Yuel as her eyes fill up with tears, and involuntarily trembling.

"H-Hey, Astel, this is..."

I'm feeling a little sorry for her. When I try to find the right words to comfort her,

"I-I lost because it was a practice match. I-If this had been a serious fight, and I had dipped my weapon in poison, it would've been my win. If it was a real fight I would have won!"

Astel turns to Yuel, nearly crying, and insists that. Somehow, it looks like she's claiming that even if she lost the match she wouldn't lose in a serious fight. Well, if Yuel just goes along with it, as far as I'm concerned it doesn't matter

who would win or lose. And they're both young girls, so it'd be a shame if Yuel aggravates her and makes her cry.

The rest depends on Yuel's reaction... and Yuel nods deeply at Astel's words.

"Yes, if it had been dipped in poison, I might have lost."

Then Yuel says that, echoing Astel's assertion. Did she read the atmosphere?

No, now that I get a good look, there's a small scratch on Yuel's right shoulder. I didn't notice it, but Yuel might have failed to dodge Astel's attack. A strike of that degree could hardly be called fatal, but sure, if her weapons were dipped in poison for real combat, Yuel might very well have been immobilized.

"I am Saint-sama's spy! I pursue Saint-sama's enemies, gather information, and now and then use poisons and chemicals to render my targets helpless. That's my job. Of course direct combat skills are essential, but there are more important things than that for a spy!"

Yuel keeps nodding in agreement with Astel's speech. Then Astel starts slowly lining bottles up before her eyes.

"I wasn't sure what I should teach you, but let's go with this. These are all poisons that I concocted myself."

"A-All of these...? A-Amazing!"

Bottles of poison, lined up in a row. When she sees them, Yuel makes an astonished voice and compliments Astel. With a twitch, Astel's drooping dog ears shake.

"I-I choose which of all these poisons to use depending on the situation."

"D-Depending on the situation... even though there are so many? Amazing!"

Yuel praises her further. Astel's dog ears shake again. Did she regain her enthusiasm? Her ears have perked up a little.

"Not just poison, even antidotes, I can prepare them all!"

"That's amazing! I haven't ever used poison. It's incredible that you can use all of those, and even make the antidotes!"

Taking a long hard look at the poison bottles, Yuel exclaims in admiration.

Astel's ears shoot straight up. Then they start wagging.



"A-As long as you understand!"

Before I knew it, the tears have disappeared from Astel's eyes and she's stopped trembling. Yuel is looking at her somewhat gently, too. I thought I should say something to console her, but looks like she already recovered.

...This kid is pretty simple, huh. Yuel seems to be lavishing her with praise naturally, though.

"First, this one is nerve paralysis poison. And this one is lethal hemorrhaging poison. These two are mainly used to coat weapons."

Is Astel in a good mood now? She's giving Yuel an explanation of the poison bottles.

...But man, poison, huh? It's not that scary to someone like me who can use healing magic, but to a normal person, when poison is used a mere scratch can

be fatal. Since Yuel's the type that has to do a lot of work to make up for her low power, it may be just the right thing for her.

"...And then this one is sleeping powder. This one is absorbed through the respiratory organs. Since it takes effect immediately and there are few side effects, it's perfect for when you don't want to kill your opponent."

Astel continues explaining her poisons. In the middle of her talk, there's something that piques my interest.

"Oh...? Sleeping powder, huh? Nice. Mind sharing some with me?"

Sleeping powder. The risks are apparently low, and even I should be able to handle it. I daresay sleeping powder is well-suited for me. I'll try negotiating with Astel.

"S-Sage-sama!? E-Even if you're the sage, you can't just put women to sleep and have your way with them!?"

"T-That's wrong! N-No, look, you see, in my case, I could fill up the room with it and keep curing myself, and I'd be able to perfectly incapacitate any enemy, right? If I had it, and I needed to fight someone, I could end it before it turns into a brawl."

By merely expressing interest in the sleeping powder, I'm subjected to some unjust accusations. Just what kind of person does Astel think I am? Or rather, something tells me my reputation has suffered considerable damage from the knights who were guarding the front gate.

...I wonder if it's because so many people were watching when I ended up being easily tempted by the succubus. Now I'm extremely worried about what has happened to my image among the people here in this mansion.

"I-I see. However, Sage-sama, can you promise me you won't use it for evil purposes?"

"Of course."

After all, I'm not that kind of villainous person.

"Saint-sama is currently in an exceedingly delicate position. Depending on Shiki-sama's conduct, her position may very well hang in the balance. Please, at

least promise me that much."

However, Astel emphasizes it further.

...How low is her confidence in me? I'm the magnificent person known as the Sage, aren't I? Wait, hold that thought,

"Hm... the saint is in a delicate position? What does that mean?"

this is the first time I'm hearing that the saint's standing is unreliable. She seems busy, but I haven't especially asked her about it.

".....Saint-sama was unable to prevent the succubus' revival despite being present at the location. In the raid by the succubus as well, she succeeded in defending the city, but she allowed the succubus herself to escape.

...It's a huge opening to take advantage of. And Saint-sama has so many enemies."

When I try asking, Astel tells me like it's not particularly a secret.

"She has a lot of enemies?"

"Yes. As a descendant of the past Sage, Saint-sama possesses a strong sense of responsibility.

...In recent years, corruption such as D'arnaud's has become rampant within the church. In the past, Saint-sama purged numerous corrupt priests and those connected to the church who committed injustices. That's why there are many who see Saint-sama as an enemy... especially within the church."

When I hear the story from Astel, I remember.

...Now that she mentions it, the saint expressly came from the royal capital to purge D'arnaud, didn't she? Well, this time D'arnaud did snatch the jewel that the succubus was sealed in, but if she's been continuously carrying out such purges every time she uncovers corruption, that would certainly create enemies within the church. If I become archbishop and start doing as I please, it sounds like I'll be purged immediately. I'd better be careful.

"Saint-sama has been exhausting all of her power to correct the church's decay from within, in order to aid the weak.

...Just like when she saved me from being a slave."

Astel looks at me and puffs out her chest as she says that. Her eyes are totally pure; I can't feel any shadow or gloominess within them. They're telling me just how deeply Astel adores and respects the saint. I'm pretty sure that being so liked by one's attendants is not very common.

...Yeah, the saint even gave a ring to the blind girl at the orphanage as charity. The matter of the shills made me think she was somewhat conniving, but when I try thinking about it calmly, perhaps she's a surprisingly kindhearted person.

"Y-Yeah. I won't misuse it. Absolutely not."

"Very well. In that case, there's no problem. Here you go."

"Um, Astel-san, well, may I have some too?"

When I put away the bottle of sleeping powder, Yuel approaches Astel as if she can't wait any longer. Her ears are waggling. Looks like she wants to try using poisons. Personally, I wish she'd get excited about more girlish things, but poisons really seem to have captured her interest.

"Sage-sama is an expert at healing magic, so there's no problem for him. As for you, I'll teach you how to make the antidote first. Handling poisons comes after that."

"...Okay."

Yuel's ears lower in disappointment. Well, Yuel can't use healing magic yet, after all. But, even though I wasn't sure it would work out at the beginning, Astel's stormy attitude from back then is nowhere to be found now. The meek Yuel unexpectedly has a good affinity with Astel and her strong sense of pride. Having the two young girls make friends with each other warms my heart. If I ignore the fact that they're holding poison.

And, as I'm watching the two of them.

"Shiki, so you were here after all!"

From the direction of the mansion, a voice calls out to me. When I look back, I see Ruruka waving to me.

Chapter 68: Eris and Ruruka

Ruruka is waving at me.

...No, that part is fine. But there's one minor discrepancy there.

Ruruka is walking over here *along with Eris*.

Picture this, Ruruka and Eris, together voluntarily. This is pretty unusual. Due to the matter of Ruruka getting under-the-table discounts at Eris' hospital, Ruruka feels self-conscious around Eris, and Eris likely doesn't think very highly of Ruruka.

I wonder why they're together?

"Y'see, Shiki, Saint-sama came and told me... you were about to fall into a completely obvious honey trap first thing in the morning, so since it can't be helped, I should stay together with you. Who knows what you'll get up to if I let you out of my sight, so she told me to keep an eye on you at all times."

Now I get it.

"That is what she told me, but I don't think she was talking to you."

"S-She glanced over at me too!"

...I pretty much get the idea.

Most likely, as an urgent countermeasure against the succubus, the saint was trying to get Eris to stay by my side. And, at the time, Ruruka happened to be nearby as well. She felt a sense of impending doom from the idea of Eris remaining beside me 24/7, so she followed her all the way here. Is that about how it went?

"B-Besides..."

Ruruka gets closer and whispers into my ear.

"We've already... kissed, right?"

Then her face turns red and she immediately moves away. Is she talking about *that*, the one on the cheek back at the beauty contest? Ruruka looks bashfully

at me for a moment, then glances in Eris' direction with a hint of superiority permeating her expression. As if she's asserting her ownership over me, before I know it she's holding my arm between her breasts. So soft.

...Now that I think about it, back when I was tempted by the succubus, Ruruka wasn't there, huh. Ruruka only got back from the royal capital after I had returned to my senses. Which means that Ruruka has no idea what Eris and I were doing back then.

And yet Ruruka keeps sending Eris a look of superiority.

...I notice Eris' expression become openly irritated by the way Ruruka is looking at her.

"Hey Shiki, hey. Let's go see Dra-chan. She's in the courtyard. Wanna feed her together? She's so cute when she's crunching up Goblins, y'know?"

"O-Oi, Ruruka, wait a m....."

Ruruka pulls on my arm that's wedged between her breasts and tries to take me somewhere. I get the feeling she's gonna show me a repulsive scene, so I kinda don't want to go, but with my arm caught in her ravine like this, my body ends up moving on its own. I can't help but go.

—However, my feet are brought to a halt.

There's a force that's enough to stop me in my tracks.

"I see... when Shiki gets tempted like this, I need to stop him, right?"

"!?"

My opposite arm from the one Ruruka is holding... it's being held between Eris' giant tits, with their overwhelming presence. My arm gets lodged deep between Eris' breasts as she pulls me towards her.



It's no good. I can't move like this. I don't feel like I can take a single step from

this spot.

"...I'm not a honey trap, though. I just wanna go see Dra-chan with Shiki."

"Do you now... but I was told by Saint-sama to remain together with Shiki."

Eris glares at Ruruka, and Ruruka glares back at her. Hold on, what's with this situation? The atmosphere is terribly volatile. I feel like I need to do something about it, but the abundant sensation I can feel on both arms is severely interfering with my thought process. A flower on both hands. Big breasts on both arms. So very soft. I'm starting to feel like it's fine for me not to do anything.

"I wanna go over to where Dra-chan is with Shiki, "just the two of us", though."

"Sorry, but I can't possibly throw out my promise with Saint-sama. Also... there's a little something I want to discuss with Shiki."

"If you have something to say, can't you just say it here?"

"I wish to speak with Shiki alone as well."

"T-That's.... o-out of the question! That's absolutely not okay!"

Eris and Ruruka are arguing back and forth for some reason. The two of them staring seriously at each other is simply frightening. No, it's not like they ever got along in the first place, though. And I've never seen them having a proper talk before.

...At any rate, even though usually Ruruka flees immediately when she sees Eris, today she's stubbornly refusing to withdraw. Resistance to the bitter end, she's got that kind of air to her. Wait, what is it that Eris wants to talk about?

I wonder if I should intervene somehow, and break apart this tempestuous atmosphere? But with both of them being so stubborn, if I prioritize Eris or Ruruka, my relationship with the other one will no doubt be fractured. I'm starting to feel like I should change the subject here, and suggest a third option for the three of us to all watch over Yuel's growth together.

As I'm considering it, suddenly I meet eyes with Yuel. Somehow, it seems like Yuel has been watching the three of us the entire time. She's making a curious

face, like "Why are they arguing?". The reason we're bickering is just that Ruruka is having a crisis over me and Eris being close, though...

—I just remembered something huge.

"Eris-san, Ruruka-san, are you okay? You don't have to fight. Master's hare-
""A-Aaaalriight, we haven't had breakfast yet!! Eris, Ruruka, let's go eat together!! C'mon, let's go!!"

I make an on-the-spot decision and insist in a loud voice, to drown out Yuel's. That was close. The third option was the most dangerous one. Just a bit further, and the fact that I'm planning to make a harem would've been exposed to Eris and Ruruka. Yuel aside, those two wouldn't so easily accept polygamy. In their present condition, Eris and Ruruka are hostile to each other, but they were in danger of both turning against me.

"C-C'mon, aren't you hungry? Let's go, right away! And it'd be bad if we disturbed Astel and Yuel while they're studying!!"

It's regrettable in this situation with bosoms on both arms, but if I don't get moving immediately here, my reputation will hit rock bottom. Once I get away from Ruruka and Eris, I retreat inside the mansion at full speed.

Though it's great that we got away from Yuel, the cause of the conflict between Eris and Ruruka hasn't been resolved. You could say that the two of them have been hostile from the start, over the treatment fees.

...It's an explosive situation to begin with, and now it's time for breakfast in this volatile atmosphere. I resign myself to that as we head to the mansion's dining hall... but fortunately, nothing that I imagined happens on the way there.

"..."

We're seated at the dining hall. Eris, sitting across from me, is looking straight down to hide her face, which is blushing and making an expression like she's been trying to endure something for a while. She's silently trembling in apparent embarrassment. Since we arrived at the dining hall, Eris has been in this mood the entire time. What made Eris get like this, you ask? The cause was the crowd of knights here in the dining hall.

Currently, the mansion is on high alert. Within the mansion alone, no less than several dozen knights are stationed. That battle of temptation between Eris and the succubus during the succubus' siege, multiple knights witnessed it firsthand.

...And, it would seem that those eyewitnesses are among the knights here in the dining hall.

"When Sage-sama was lured by the succubus, that's the one who supposedly got him to come back with only her body."

"She has to remain together with Sage-sama as a counter to the succubus, apparently."

"Compared to that chopping board succubus, she's definitely way more succubus-like..."

—Gossip about Eris is spreading like wildfire.

"S-Succubus-like...!?"

Hanging her head in shame, the fork that Eris was using to restlessly pick at her meal falls from her hand. Looks like she couldn't let that last line go. Eris hangs her head even further and starts trying to hide her body that's covered in her demure monastic habit by hunching over. She's blushing bright red all the way to her ears.

I can tell from a glance that her head is brimming with shame. Doesn't look like I have room to be worried about Ruruka anymore. Speaking of Ruruka, she seems concerned about the knights' gossip too; she's ignoring Eris and straining her ears. Right now, there's more attention on Eris in this dining hall than on me, the Sage.

...That's not how it started. In the beginning,

"So that's Sage-sama...? He was the one who cast those maximum Area Heals when we were fighting the succubus!"

"The Area Heals back at the time of the Krankheit Turtle were from that Sage-sama too, apparently."

with that kind of feeling, the knights were gossiping about me and the superhuman healing magic I used in the succubus battle. Talking about how awesome my healing magic was, about the title of Sage, all of their attention was on me. But knights won't talk about the same thing forever.

"Speaking of the Krankheit Turtle, back then, didn't they say he risked his life to protect Fran-sama? C'mon, you saw it too, right? Him getting all those medals from Lord-sama."

"Now that you mention it, I heard he beat an Armor Ogre variant to death by himself."

Gradually, the stories got slightly twisted around,

"He doesn't look that strong, but people aren't always what they seem... the only info I got was that he's extremely fond of women, though."

"Yeah, he was getting manipulated by the succubus, I saw it too."

developed this way,

"That reminds me, look, next to Sage-sama... that blondie... she and the succubus both tempted Sage-sama, and she won."

"She beat the succubus at seducing a man!?"

and ended up like that. Most likely, many knights read the Bible as part of their education. "She beat the succubus at seducing a man", that one line by a single knight, was apparently utterly unbelievable. Since then, the whole time the knights have been eating breakfast, a conversation has been unfolding around the succubus and Eris.

...It's not particularly like the knights have also been sending vulgar glances to Eris, or talking dirty. Rather than calling it trivial gossip, it's more like they're confirming the details of their protection target with one another, so that doesn't mean I should stop their conversations either.

Well, it's not like they're doing any real harm, so if I had to decide, I'd say I don't really mind. And speaking of that, having them be able to share information with their fellow knights is connected to my own safety. Plus, there's also been a strange rumor floating around that I even cut one of the

knights' pay or something.

Disregarding the knights' conversation and continuing my meal, I reach towards the food with my fork.

"Oh yeah, what kind of relationship do those two have with Sage-sama?"

"Yeah, I saw that redhead adventurer confessing to Sage-sama."

"Does that mean we should recognize her as Sage-sama's lover? In that case, she should have a pretty high priority as a protection target, huh."

Abruptly, I hear the conversation between a few of the knights sitting nearby take a strange turn.

"H-Hey, Shiki... they said we're l-lovers!"

Ruruka twists her body happily in the seat next to me. Looks like she heard it too. Her face reddens a little, and she prods my side.

"No no, back with the succubus, isn't that blondie the one who was all glued to him, even hugging and kissing him? Ain't she his real lover?"

"That was so intense, it looked like she even used her tongue."

—This time, the fork falls out of Ruruka's hand.

...Oh no. At once, I avert my eyes from Ruruka. Oh man, if I get cross-examined here it's gonna be about *that* subject.

"G-Glued to him... h-hugging and kissing!? T-Tongue!? W-What do they mean tongue!?"

However, my feeble resistance is futile, and Ruruka questions me in a loud voice.

"H-Hey, Shiki, what are they talking about? Y-You and Eris kissed!? S-She used her tongue!?"

"N-No, Ruruka, that was..."

I don't remember whether tongue was involved or not. A lot went on while I was being manipulated by the succubus. I meet eyes with Eris, but her face tells me she can't endure it all and she hides it. She clutches her arms against her chest and curls up even further into a ball, resulting in her voluptuous breasts

being squeezed precariously.

"Ahh, oh wow, so one of them is his mistress?"

I can hear the knights muttering something in a whisper. Not good. That term is a land mine.

"M-Mistreeeessss!?"

Ruruka's voice is quivering; did it trigger her trauma? Her eyes are wide open, and she keeps opening and closing her mouth.

As for the knights, they're making faces like "Oh boy, Sage-sama's got love troubles", as if they had nothing to do with it. These bastards.

...Guess I should've put a stop to it on the way over after all. Let's ask the lord to cut their pay later.

But, regretting it now won't turn back time.

"Sage-sama ain't doing too bad for himself. Wonder which one is his favorite?"

The phrase "which one is his favorite?", grumbled by a knight. With those words as the trigger, Ruruka and Eris both look at me at the same time.

Oh crap. A decisive crack is about to form in my harem plan. The mood in the room is telling me to choose which one is my favorite, to clearly declare which one I love.

But there's no way I can choose one or the other. Given my personality, if the one I didn't choose solicits me afterwards, I'll be tempted and the relationship with the one I chose previously will no doubt break down. The fact that I was easily lured by the succubus reaffirmed it. In the end, a harem is the only choice for me.

And, as I'm worrying over how to respond,

"...Shiki... I, there's something I have to say to you."

Eris opens her mouth first. She has a serious expression, like she's troubled by my inability to choose.

"...I really wanted to tell you this when it was just the two of us. But I don't want to regret not saying it later on."

...That reminds me, she did tell me she had something to talk about. I wonder what it's about? Well, at this point I don't care what it is as long as it changes the subject. I'll listen to whatever she has to say.

"W-What is it? What's the matter?"

"I... that side of you that's promiscuous with women, I really, truly despise it."

—I don't want to listen anymore.

"...Selfishly giving price discounts at the hospital, touching girls' breasts the second I take my eyes off of you, and giving me those same looks every day."

...No doubt about it. This is a sermon. It's like Eris is thinking back on the old days, that's the kind of distant look she's making. Seeing my present love snafu must have ended up reminding her of the troubles that got between us in the past.

"Especially back then; to be completely honest, just remembering it now makes me quite irritated."

Eris breathes out a small sigh. "Back then" most likely refers to around the time right before she threw me out of the hospital.

...Wait, isn't this really bad? The way this conversation is headed, with Eris lecturing me, means...

"Oi, ain't she gonna dump Sage-sama?"

"Does he cheat on her all the time? Well yeah, no wonder she's telling him off."

The conversation between the knights reaches my ears.

...Is that what it means after all? Am I gonna end up getting dumped?

—N-No, it's not like that's decided yet. Giving up on Eris is not an option for me. I should still be able to avert it.

"T-Time out! Let's have this conversation later! L-Look, didn't you want to talk about this when it's just the two of us?"

I can't let Eris continue her speech. I absolutely can't let her make that declaration. And at some point, maybe Eris will re-examine me and there will be a chance for recovery. I need to buy time somehow until then. That's all I can do.

"I'm not stopping."

However, Eris makes a resolutely determined expression and cuts me off. I've only ever seen her make an expression like this once before. It was back when she threw me out of the hospital.

...When Eris' eyes get like this, there's absolutely no changing her mind.

"H-Hold on, Eris! If we just have a calm and composed discussion, I'm sure we can"

"...But you know, it's different now."

"reach an understanding, so...! Wait... eh?....?"

What did she just say? It's different now? Does that mean...

"I... love you. Even now, I can't stand the side of you that's indiscriminate with women. But even though there's that part of you, I'm in love with you."

My head goes pure white in an instant as Eris' words reverberate through it. As soon as I comprehend the meaning of her words, my heart thumps and I feel it leap in my chest.

When I look at Eris' face once again, her cheeks redden slightly as she looks back at me unflinchingly. Looking into her eyes, my heart leaps again. I notice her face gradually grow redder and redder.

One of the nearby knights whistles.

"T-That means...?"

"Since I've thrown you out of the hospital once before, you may not believe me, but..."

As our eyes meet again, Eris' body shivers, and she lowers her reddened face to hide it. And, maintaining that position, she squeezes out her voice.

"When you bought back the hospital for me, I was incredibly grateful to you. When I heard that you were going deep into the forest with the knights, I felt so worried. Having another girl confess her love to you made me terribly jealous. And when you used Area Heal on the city and EX Heal for Farah-chan at the orphanage, you chose saving others over having your true ability discovered. I came to care so much for you."

With each continued statement from Eris, the nearby knights raise up a "So nice!" jeer. Despite blushing again from the heckling, Eris doesn't stop weaving her words.

"Moreover, when you saved me at the church... you got so battered, but you kept standing up time after time. Even though you could have run away by yourself. But you didn't show the slightest sign of trying to escape. You protected me to the bitter end."

After saying all that, Eris raises her head.

"That is why I love you. I want to marry you. I want you to choose me, not anyone else."

And, looking into my eyes, she says that. It's not just her, all of the surrounding knights are looking at me.

"E-Eris... I-I..."

I want to accept. The words "Let's get married, right now." are right on the tip of my tongue. To marry Eris, and build a happy family. I can picture the scene clearly in my mind.

—But, it's impossible.

If I accept here, invariably I'll be seeing Eris' saddened face in the future. From the worst side of me, my unfaithfulness. Besides, I already ended up telling Yuel not to worry on account of the harem. Yuel will cry too.

"N-Not okay... that's not okay!"



From the side, I hear a shout. Ruruka is staring at Eris with her lips drawn

tight, trembling.

"You say something too, Shiki! That it's not okay! Because, because if you don't...!"

Irritation. Ruruka's expression is full of it. She might possibly have sensed that my feelings are leaning towards Eris in one way or another. She clutches at her chest as if she's in pain, then slams both hands on the table to vent her emotions that have no outlet.

My eyes flinch shut from the sound and the impact.

And, when I open them again–

a stew dish is right in front of my eyes. It's at a 90° angle to the ground, approaching my face from 30cm away. Ah, now it's more like 25cm away.

Sensing the impending crisis, my brain starts to turn my head at high speed. Why is there a stew dish right in front of my face? I only closed my eyes for a moment.

–The scene right before I closed my eyes flashes back in my mind.

Ahh, it's that. When Ruruka slammed her hands on the table, one of them hit the edge of this stew dish. And, in the moment my eyes were closed, the other side of the dish was launched up from the force of it, and came towards me at a 90° angle.

That's as far as my understanding gets before the hot stew hits me directly in the face.

"Ah, sorry, Shiki."

It comes out of her mouth by reflex. That's the type of apology I get from Ruruka.

"Ah... a-are you alright!?"

A few seconds pass after that, and as if she fully realized the situation, I hear a more emotional voice from Ruruka. Maybe she encountered an unexpected situation when the stew hit me square in the face, and it took a moment for her thoughts to reset.

"W-Wait a minute... are you hurt?"

Eris' voice comes to me from the other side of the stew dish as well. Thankfully, it wasn't hot enough to scald me.

"If I had to say one way or the other, I guess I'm fine, but..."

I peel the stew dish off of my face, but I can't open my eyes. After wiping the area around my eyes thoroughly with my hands, I'm finally able to open them. When I look at my hands, they're filthy to the point that it's hard to find a spot that's not covered in stew. The same probably goes for my face and the rest of my head. Clumps of stew are clinging to my clothes as well, and I can sense the moisture from it seeping into the fabric as time passes.

"I-I'm so sorry, Shiki! I-It wasn't on purpose... my hand, um, hit the edge of the stew dish... um, I-I'm really sorry okay!?"

Do I look that terrible? Ruruka is apologizing profusely. And yet... this could be convenient. A confession from Eris. And on top of that, Ruruka already told me she loves me. I want to give it some proper thought, but I can't do that in this situation, surrounded by Ruruka and the other knights. It's a good chance to get some time to myself for once.

"Don't worry about it... for the time being, I'll go take a bath and change my clothes."

That's it, a temporary withdrawal. What I want more than anything right now is time to reflect. I want to leisurely soak up to my shoulders in a bathtub, and think slowly and carefully about Eris and Ruruka.

"...M-Me too... I'll get in with you!"

However, unexpectedly, I hear such a voice from beside me. It's Ruruka. Ruruka is saying those things with a reddened face.

"...!? H-How can you..."

"S-Since I got you dirty, Shiki, I'll wash you!"

Eris' eyes snap wide open, but Ruruka declares that in a strong voice. I wanna go. I wanna go take a bath with Ruruka. I really wanna go. But now is not the best time.

Right now I want to ruminate over Eris and Ruruka. I can't let myself get carried away by "bath time with Ruruka

" and leave the things I need to think about unsettled.

And Eris is watching me, like she's waiting to see how I'll respond. If I get into the bath together with Ruruka, it's obvious how Eris will feel about that. I need to properly do some rational thinking now more than ever.

See, even now Eris is opening her mouth to tell me something. I bet she's about to give me a warning.

"I-In that case... I-I will... j-join you as well..."

No friggin' way.

Chapter 69: Expectation

"This is awesome, this is so awesome..."

I'm nervous. I'm in the large bath at the lord's mansion. While soaking up to my shoulders in the warm, cloudy water that fills it, I've been feeling restless. In my excess nervousness, I've been talking to myself for a while now.

...Most likely, Ruruka and Eris both ended up saying they'd get in the bath together with me due to the course of events back there. Perhaps not wanting me to see them undressing, they said they'd wait for me to get in first, with a strong sense of embarrassment in their attitudes. Even after washing my face and scrubbing my body, I can still vaguely see the two of them huddled in the dressing room through the frosted glass.

"But... the two of them are probably still going to come in, right?"

Eris and Ruruka have both told me they love me. Most likely, the two of them have gotten into a situation where they can't retreat even if they want to. If Eris retreats then Ruruka will enter and tempt me with her charm, and if Ruruka retreats then even Eris may very well do the same.

My heart is pounding now. Or should I say, it's been pounding since some time ago. I-I wonder if they'll let me wash their bodies? Or wait... what if it doesn't end with just washing?

Neither of them are the type to consider immediately having sexual relations as soon as they fall in love. If I had to say... they're the type to steadily take things one step at a time.

—But that doesn't apply right now. Currently, they've both ended up in a situation where they're playing chicken over the extent to which they'll accompany me.

For instance, let's say Eris and Ruruka are washing my body. First, one of them will be washing me from behind. In terms of personality, Ruruka is more likely to act first, so let's assume she washes my back. When she does, in order to counter that, it means Eris will have no choice but to wash my front.

I'm getting in the bath together with the two of them; there's no way I can maintain a calm, tranquil, serene condition. In the sense that my front side strongly asserts its existence. Surely, Eris will inevitably avert her eyes while washing my chest and legs.

But she can't avert her eyes forever. Eris and Ruruka are both well aware that in order to do something about my feelings, seduction is the most expedient method. It's not like there's no possibility that it will go on like that and escalate.

"Calm down... calm down, me..."

As my excitement rises again, it makes its way out of my mouth in the form of my internal monologue.

On the other side of the frosted glass, I can vaguely see Eris and Ruruka's silhouettes. It looks like the two of them are slowly removing their clothes in silence. The only sound that reaches me is the rustling of their clothes.

"Wha...! They're amazing... e-ehhh!?"

Then suddenly, I hear Ruruka's surprised voice.

"I-I don't think... they're really that incredible, though..."

I can hear Eris' bashful voice too.

I know what just happened. Most likely, Eris removed her top.

...They sure are impressive, huh. I was amazed too, the first time I saw them. So overly amazed that I immediately dove onto Eris in the bathroom, and got myself kicked out of the hospital the next day.

But no matter how much I look at them now, she won't throw me out. We have an agreement. Even touching them, maybe she'll allow it. I doubt that either Ruruka or Eris would get mad.

"Something like this... is it okay for something like this to happen...?"

Somehow, I very much feel like offering my gratitude to something. But I'm afraid I have no religion that I believe in. For now, I guess I could thank the

succubus for the part she played in my relationship progress? And having to be wary of the succubus was also the reason behind the situation developing into this. Succubus, apostle of the evil god, you have my thanks. And thank you too, evil god, for producing the succubus... at this point, I may as well become an evil god adherent.

Across the frosted glass, the scene in the dressing room is visible. Perhaps flustered by Eris removing her clothes, Ruruka too is evidently making undressing motions. My excitement is steadily rising.

Then, through the frosted glass, below Ruruka's red hair, everything has turned skin-colored. I can only see a vague silhouette, but she has definitely taken off her clothes.

C'mon, all that's left is to open the door connecting the dressing room over there to the bath. Just a bit further, and their figures will be visible.

For a short time, both of them freeze and their movements stop. But slowly, they start to move again. Looks like they've overcome their uncertainty. I get the feeling there was something I needed to think about, but the fact that the two of them are about to enter the bath is the only thing on my mind anymore. Now, come... c'mon... come in!!

Then, the door starts to open!
—That instant.

"It's the succubuuus! The succubus has cooome!"

The throaty voice of a knight resounds throughout the mansion.

"That shitty succubus!!!"

To think that the succubus would actually come around with this timing. But it was just a little further until Eris and Ruruka entered the bath. Even though we were so close, being disturbed at a time like...!

"...No, wait...?"

...The fact that the succubus has come, that means that both Eris and Ruruka need to stay by my side. In other words, it means they need to enter this bath. Conversely, it's possible that the succubus' arrival will make the two of them

hurry inside.

My chance hasn't disappeared yet. I'm gambling on the hope that arises in my mind. However, from the dressing room,

"...I-It's too soon, isn't it."

I hear Ruruka's voice.

"T-That's right. I-It's certainly too sudden... entering the bath together, that is. A-And there's no window in this bath large enough for the succubus to enter, either. There's only a single entrance, so... so it's fine to wait."

Then I hear Eris' voice, agreeing with Ruruka's statement.

"T-That's right! Like I thought, it's too early! I-I just got a bit impatient!"

I can tell what state Ruruka's in now even without looking. First of all, she's no doubt averting her gaze from Eris' breasts, making a face that doesn't have a shred of self-confidence.

...Most likely, she saw Eris' devastatingly voluptuous breasts and ended up doubting herself. Despite being the one who decided on her own to enter the bath.

"O-our clothes... should we put them back on?"

"Ah, y-yeah!"

Most likely, Eris is simply embarrassed to be seen naked. And we haven't properly taken the right steps, so maybe she's thinking that this is a mistake. She wants to withdraw if she can, that sentiment is keenly coming across to me. But I was hoping she wouldn't back down at this point.

–Then the dressing room grows quiet. I've been left behind, alone in the bath.

...Where should I vent these feelings? Since my chance has disappeared right in front of my eyes, all of my risen expectations simmer up to a boiling rage.

"Just you wait, succubus."

I spit out curses on the name of the evil god's apostle whom I was thanking until just now.

"I will definitely catch you. I'll strip you down and parade you around the entire city!!"

I've renewed my determination to catch the succubus!!

"Apparently the succubus charged into the dining hall by herself! Hurry to the dining hall!"

"Her targets are Sage-sama and Saint-sama! She must not be allowed to pass!"

"Bar the exits! She must be brought down in the dining hall!"

When I leave the bath, the inside of the mansion is in an uproar. I can hear knights shouting from everywhere in the mansion. Judging by the contents of their voices, it seems the succubus has rushed in without bringing any monsters.

...That reminds me, about the story of the succubus seeking treatment for her petrification in another town's church.

"Is she being hasty due to the petrification progressing?"

Perhaps the succubus is really feeling the pressure. But this mansion is currently so prepared that you could call it the anti-succubus strategic headquarters. It should be impossible for the succubus, with no combat ability, to slip past the guards in this mansion and do anything to me or the saint. This attack is beyond reckless.

"It'd be bad if Shiki got tempted by the succubus and taken away, right...? F-For now... h-hands, or something? S-Should we hold hands?"

As I'm thinking about such things, suddenly, there's a pleasantly cool sensation on my right hand. It's Ruruka.

...She blushes in moderate embarrassment, and grasps my hand a bit shyly. Although rather than grasping my hand, I wish she'd get into the bath together with me instead.

"T-That's right... h-hands, right. Holding hands is fine, right."

Piggybacking on Ruruka, Eris also softly touches my left hand. As for Eris, she's acting somewhat relieved.

...By some chance, Eris may even be remembering the words the saint told her before, when I was being tempted by the succubus. Although rather than holding hands, that option would be fine instead.

"E-Eeeeeeeeep! W-Whyyyy! Why are there so many of youuuu!"

"Don't let the succubus get away! Swords, arrows, whatever works! Hurl everything you've got and pin her to the wall!"

"That's it, her wings! Cut off her wings! Without her wings she shouldn't be able to flee all over the place anymore!"

"S-Stoop! I don't wanna get pinned! My wings, not my wiiiiings!"

...Man, to plunge into the dining hall of all places, the succubus sure is unlucky. There should be a crowd of knights having a meal in there. For sure, I can easily imagine it becoming a "like a moth to a flame" situation.

"My petrification! I just want you to cure my petrificaatiioooooonnnn!!!"

"She broke out through the windooow! After her, after heerrrr!"

With a crash, there's the sound of a window shattering, and simultaneously the bitter cries of the succubus and the roars of the knights resound throughout the mansion. When I take a look outside through the window, I can see the succubus flying overhead.

"The succubus is running away, isn't she."

"A bit of her wing got cut off around the tip, huh. And her hair is kinda burnt."

"Her leg too, it's already petrified past the knee... I know it's necessary to subjugate her, but... she's starting to look a little pitiful somehow..."

After entering the mansion, within a few minutes the succubus runs away with wounds all over her body.

...Seems like the mansion's defense is perfect. I was planning on getting my retribution, but I didn't even have to lift my hand. The succubus ran away without even managing to discover the fact that I'm inside the mansion.

At this pace, if the saint and I just hunker down within this mansion, the succubus could very well be a statue in a few days. If her petrification has progressed past the knee in a single day, most likely in another 2-3 days, the petrification will have advanced to her wings and she won't even be able to fly anymore. And apparently there aren't any other EX Heal users in the vicinity besides us. With this, the succubus is already in checkmate.

Man, what a nuisance. Just a bit further and Eris and Ruruka would have entered the bath.

"O-Oh maaaan. The succubus coming sure surprised me! W-Well then, you got off all the mess from the stew too, so why don't we go see Dra-chan! Dra-chan! Ah, Eris-san can come too, alright!"

"T-That's right. Why don't we go see the dragon? W-We should try to be friendly, right..."

Neither one of them are in the mood anymore. Rather, they won't even touch upon the fact that we were about to get in the bath together. They're completely trying to pretend it never happened. Most likely, even if I say we should go at this point, they won't get in with me. Plus they no longer have a reason to.

"That reminds me, Yuel was in the garden. Just to be sure, I should let her know I'm safe."

She might be worried and all. The moment I try to continue,

"Master, I'm here."

"Uwoah!"

she calls out to me from behind. That freaking surprised me. Like, really surprised me. It surprised me so much that I ended up letting go of Eris and Ruruka's hands.

"Y-Yuel, you were here...?"

"Astel-san told me. A spy must always erase their presence, it seems. In order for me to get used to erasing my presence by habit, she told me to first practice waiting to serve Master by your side without you noticing."

I wish you wouldn't make Yuel do strange things. Did they already finish their poison studies?

...Hold on, how long has she been there? Since the dining hall? The bath? Or since the succubus came?

"She has been behind you since around right after you left the bath. You didn't notice?"

Eris points it out, as if to say "What are you talking about?". What's with that, it's super scary.

"Y-Yuel, y-you don't have to erase your presence near me. L-Look, I can't pet your head that way, right?"

Scary. Too scary. When Yuel hides seriously, without a doubt I won't notice her presence. I'll need to remain conscious of Yuel's gaze at all times. I won't even be able to use Slime Jelly in the bathroom without fear anymore.

"Yes, understood!"

"A-And don't hide near me either, okay? Yuel is cute, so I want to always be able to see you."

"Yes!"

Yuel nods enthusiastically. I'm glad she's such a docile girl. She's grinning, perhaps because she was called cute.

...No, wait. There's something off. That's it, her gaze isn't directed towards me.

Yuel's gaze is pointed at Ruruka and Eris.

...Ah, this grinning is probably because the three of us were linking hands. And she didn't seem to want Eris and Ruruka to bicker. She must be thinking that they've reconciled. Although in actuality, it's just that between the bath and the succubus and whatnot, things have gotten rather hazy.

But I'll let this misunderstanding remain in place. I'm worried that she'll reveal the harem plan again. And besides, if she knew that most people don't actually accept harems, Yuel would probably cry.

Chapter 70: Collar

I head for my room while talking with Yuel. Yuel had been studying various things with Astel since morning, but seems like it got called off partway. Apparently the saint is going to head outside the mansion, so Astel will be accompanying her.

"Oh right, did Astel already teach you about poisons?"

"Yes. Today she taught me how to use paralysis poison, and antidote compounding. She shared a small bottle of paralysis poison with me, too. She's going to teach me tomorrow as well, I think."

Eris and Ruruka are trailing behind, maintaining a bit of distance from me. When I turn around to check, both of them back off from me as if they choreographed it in advance.

...As I suspected, trying to enter the bath together with me was excessively hasty for the two of them. They want to pretend it never happened and not bring it up again, I can keenly sense that kind of atmosphere.

Well, in the end, I don't intend to ask them to get back in the bath now or anything. And Yuel is here too. There's nothing I can do, so I've decided to make some idle chatter with Yuel to cure my sadness.

"Ohh? Nice work. What's she gonna teach you tomorrow? If today was paralysis poison, then is it gonna be hemorrhaging poison or something next?"

"Tomorrow is aphrodisiacs."

"...What was that?"

"Aphrodisiacs."

"I-I see... a-aphrodisiacs, huh."

Why aphrodisiacs? How did we end up on aphrodisiacs? We were supposed to be having idle chatter. It should have been a safe topic.

...I take a look into Yuel's eyes.

They're no different from usual. Not especially impatient, no sign of

embarrassment either. She's casually looking at me just like normal. What the heck is Yuel thinking, aphrodisiacs of all things...

No, I must be thinking too hard. Yuel wouldn't use aphrodisiacs with wicked intent. I mean, she's not

me. I'm sure she has a respectable reason.

"We'll supposedly be studying how to make antidotes for aphrodisiacs. In the event that the succubus uses them, Master may no longer be in any condition to use Dis-Poison."

"I-I see, right, of course!"

See, it was a respectable reason. In Yuel's case, I don't need to be worried. Thinking too much. I was thinking too much.

"Also..."

Yuel abruptly mutters softly. After that, her face bashfully reddens, and she wiggles her head as if to shake off her earthly desires. Then, clutching the hem of her clothes, Yuel looks down.

"...Nothing, never mind."

"I-Is that so. I-If it's nothing, then fine."

If it's nothing then there's no problem. There shouldn't be any problem, right?

—As I make small talk with Yuel in that fashion, having a problem-free conversation, a figure appears at the other end of the hallway. Those characteristic blonde drills are Fran's, no mistaking it. Behind her, Sera is there too.

"Ahh, there you are. I've been looking for you."

Then she calls out to me.

"Looking for me?"

"Indeed, just earlier I overheard a knight reporting to Saint-sama. It would seem that in the basement of the church, they have discovered D'arnaud's secret storehouse. Would you care to accompany me?"

For a moment I wonder what sort of business she has with me, but apparently she's inviting me to go somewhere. I don't really get why she's inviting me, though.

"Accompany you... you're asking me?"

"I told you previously that I would teach you magic, did I not?"

I ask for confirmation, and Fran makes a somewhat cross expression as she replies.

"I have no intention of leaving that which I have once promised unfulfilled. Knowing that archbishop, he had surely amassed a plethora of valuable magic tools, the sort one would not be able to obtain in the markets. I suspect that there will be plenty of things suitable for use in practicing magic as well."

Now I get it. So the magic lesson that we left half-unfinished last time, she wants to get it over with once and for all?

D'arnaud wore a boatload of mana capacity increasing rings, that much I clearly remember. For sure, if that guy had a hidden warehouse, something tells me it'll produce a big pile of high-priced magic tools. Just as Fran said, we might even be able to find something suitable for magic practice.

"...Wait, but... is it alright?"

This girl... isn't she mad at me? She has no reason not to be.

—Back when she was teaching me magic, I pretended I had barely any mana.

It was in the form of running with Fran's misunderstanding, but Fran was earnestly trying to teach me magic, and I lied to her about my own ability. I remember her unusually kind and sympathetic voice. Though considering how she normally acts, I'm half-expecting to get hit by a Fireball every time we meet.

As I'm pondering, Sera comes close and whispers into my ear.

"...Fran seems to want the magic capacity increasing magic tools that the archbishop possessed. However, though she may be the lord's daughter, unsurprisingly it is not as if she can just freely take such expensive magic tools. Accordingly, she thought to request them using the justification that they're necessary in order to instruct Sage-sama in magic."

"Ah, I get it."

She's just using me as a front, huh. Anyone who uses magic would want a magic tool that increases mana capacity. That being the case, their price is extraordinarily high. Though she's the lord's daughter, be that as it may, she must not be rich enough to afford one.

"But I do believe that she truly wants to teach you magic properly."

However, as if to deny my thoughts, Sera whispers.

"The matter of the Krankheit Turtle's poison mist. At the time, the one most thankful to the person who cast Area Heal on the entire city... was most likely Fran, you see."

Now that she mentions it, when we got back to the city from the forest and heard about the poison mist spreading inside, Fran was the most flustered one, huh. When I glance over at Fran, she quickly looks away in a huff.

I only did it to prevent Yuel from crying, but... I guess it's a good thing I did.

Under Fran's guidance, we move to the church. Along with Yuel, Sera, Eris, Ruruka, and a few other escort knights, we make quite the large family. When we enter the place of worship, a large number of magic tools are already spread out across its paved stones.

"S-Sage-samaaa...!"

When I enter, a lone priestess calls out to me.

"M-My name is S-Salina! I serve as a direct subordinate of Saint-sama. I-It's an honor to meet you!"

"Y-Yeah."

She has decent tits and a moderately pretty face. Looks like she's a subordinate of the saint. Is my Sage title intimidating her? She seems somewhat tense.

...I wish the saint had introduced me to her over Astel.

"And what might you be doing here?"

"Oh my, Fran-sama. I have been tasked by Saint-sama with managing the magic tools here. As the retrieval work is finished for the magic tools we've discovered, now I'm more or less just waiting for the appraiser to come. By the way, for what purpose have Sage-sama and Fran-sama come...?"

"You see, in preparation for an attack by the succubus, we came to see if there might perhaps be any magic tools effective for improving Sage-sama's combat ability to any extent possible."

"Is that so. If that's the case, I shall send a report to Saint-sama and Lord-sama. By all means, please have a look."

"Y-You need not inform Father..."

When Fran hears the part about reporting to the lord, her cheek twitches.

...Did this bitch not tell the lord she was coming here? Well, this was the property of the archbishop of the church to begin with. Judging from the fact that the management of the magic tools here is being carried out not by the knights but by the saint's subordinate, they were probably collected by the church originally. Her plan seems to be using me as an excuse to receive a magic tool for herself as well, but the lord, as her biological parent, will likely see through to her true intentions easily. I bet he's gonna get crazy mad at Fran afterwards.

"W-Well then, that being the case, I shall have a look."

But Fran really seems to want a mana capacity raising magic tool. Though since she can use the kind of magic that fried a Krankheit Turtle in one shot, I get the feeling she'd be fine without any magic tools. Well, back then it didn't die instantly even though it was burnt black, so if she had a little more power, all that trouble afterwards with me falling into the river and all wouldn't have happened. It's not like I can't understand. Making her escape, Fran walks over to the area where the ring-shaped magic tools are.

"Alright, guess we'll have a look too. Maybe there'll be something good."

Is the title of Sage that powerful to a priest? The approval came easily. Charmed by our words, she decides to let us have a look. I'm being taken

advantage of by Fran, but if there's any magic tool I want, I may as well take it. And the archbishop abused his authority so much for his own benefit, so he may have had the sort of magic tools you can't normally find. If possible, I want one that lets me conveniently see through clothes or something.

"Master, there are so many collars."

At a rough glance, there are all sorts of rings, bracelets, books, and canes, but the most numerous ones are the necklaces. Rather, among the magic tools spread out around this place, about 80% of them are black collars.

...Most likely, these are the magic tools that were used back at the beauty pageant to manipulate those monsters. Was he mass-producing these independently? There are an incredible number of them. Over a hundred, I'd say.

"It seems that the one who was providing these collars to the evil god adherents was D'arnaud after all. Most likely, he used his ill-gotten funds to independently develop and mass-produce them..."

The saint's subordinate priestess makes a regretful face as she explains. Well, the beings known as evil god adherents could be called enemies of humanity, and yet someone with the eminent position of archbishop turned out to be one of them. As someone connected to the church, she likely has strong feelings about it.

"I see... but man, there sure is a mountain of collars here. Is this everything?"

"Y-Yes. Although... they haven't yet been appraised. Outside of those collars, there are many whose use hasn't been confirmed. I believe the appraiser will arrive before much longer, so..."

"Ah, it's fine, I can use Appraisal."

"M-My goodness... a-as expected of Sage-sama...!"

With nothing better to do, I try using Appraisal on the nearby collars.

...Like I thought, they're the same as the ones I saw before. By attaching one

to a monster, the monster can be controlled at will. That's the kind of magic tool they are.

...With this many of them, I wonder if I could create a host of monsters like the succubus does? An ability like hers to create an army has exceptional compatibility with my wide-range healing ability. According to the succubus, enough to "even conquer the world". If I could form even a small monster army, even if the succubus brought along a great host exceeding it, I bet I'd end up winning with room to spare.

"...I guess the bottleneck is how to assemble the monsters? Besides, the succubus likely doesn't have the leeway anymore to gather monsters and attack us again... she'll clearly be turned to stone within another two to three days."

Seems like they would've been useful, maybe if I knew about them before the succubus' attack, but in the current situation I doubt I'll have a need for them. Seems like by the time I finish gathering monsters, the succubus will be completely petrified. Well, I'm still gonna take them just in case, though.

"Can I have these collars until things are settled with the succubus? If I don't end up needing them, I'll return them."

"Y-Yes! By all means, Sage-sama!"

Since I got permission from the saint's subordinate, I start stuffing every last one in my item box.

—As I do, I notice Yuel staring at me with a dazed look.

...? I wonder what's wrong?

Yuel is holding a somewhat luxurious collar in her hand as she watches me putting away the other collars. Is the one she's holding the same kind? It's decorated with gems; maybe she mistook it as an accessory or something. What should I do if she asks me to put it on her or something?

"Master, you can use the Appraisal skill?"

"Y-Yeah... I can, why?"

I realize as I'm saying it. That blank look of hers was most likely surprise.

...Up until now, I've used my Appraisal skill to identify Yuel's skill, and to determine the abilities of magic tools in front of her. But I didn't tell Yuel that I used the Appraisal skill to do so. I sorta forgot about that.

...What should I do if she cries because her master's a liar or something? No, technically speaking I didn't lie about it though. It's just that her astonished reaction was amusing, so I didn't want to mention the truth about my having the Appraisal skill.

"Is that so? To even be able to use the Appraisal skill, Master is amazing!"

For an instant she seems flustered, but Yuel merely nods in agreement. Then she makes a complete change and starts looking at me with sparkling eyes.

"Ah, Master, this one seems a little different from the other collars!"

After that, simply remembering her original objective, she presents the collar she's holding to me. Looks like she doesn't particularly want to put it on. It merely caught her interest because it seemed different from the others.

"Oh wow... that archbishop, he even developed something like this?"

When I try using Appraisal, it's certainly different. But in the end, it's too late. Now that the succubus' petrification is nearly certain, I shouldn't need it. Well, I'm gonna take this one too, just in case.

"Can I have this one too?"

"Yes, if Sage-sama says it's necessary, by all means, please take it with you! ... I'm indebted to Sage-sama for treating my petrification. If there's anything I can do for you, anything at all..."

...Apparently the subordinate of the saint whose petrification I treated was none other than this priestess. Hold on, I thought the reason she permitted me to take whatever I wanted was because I'm the Sage, but apparently it was entirely her personal feelings. I wonder if it's actually alright for me to take these? Also, I don't think that the words "anything at all" should be uttered so casually.

I'm well aware that Eris and Ruruka, who viewed accessory-type magic tools

as rare until just now, are carefully observing my behavior. Naturally, if I were to say something like "Did you just say
anything

?" here, that would leave a bad impression with not just Yuel, but Eris and Ruruka as well.

"Even without using Appraisal, as expected, a magic tool that increases magic capacity can be identified simply by putting it on. I've already finished. I heard you mention being able to use Appraisal; have you found any magic tools that seem suitable for practicing magic?

As I'm contemplating, a satisfied Fran forces her way into the conversation. Did she already finish securing her share of the magic tools?

"Uwaah... that's some serious bling."

Ruruka mutters when she sees Fran.

...She's certainly decked out. Much like that archbishop, her fingers are studded with mana capacity increasing rings.

"They suit me well, no?"

Replying thusly to Ruruka's words, Fran holds her fingers up to her own face. After that, as if unfolding a fan, she spreads her bedazzled hands. Then she gives a prideful snort. But what is it about her? When Fran, with her blonde twin drills, does that... how do I describe it...



"How should I put this... it's gaudy... like new money."

"N-New money!?"

Was she shocked by Ruruka's impression? Fran shakes violently. I think it's gaudy too. Luxurious hair + extravagant accessories = I feel like I'm gonna hurl.

...Hold on, more importantly, there's something bothering me.

"Oi, all totaled, how much are those worth? They're probably gonna sell off the magic tools here to use for taxes or to add to the church funds, right? Won't it be bad if you walk off with a slew of them?"

I'm just borrowing them, though, so there's no problem for me. And I'll return them once the matter of the succubus is sorted out.

"I-I'm only testing them for a while, I shall return them afterwards! M-More importantly, have you properly found a suitable magic tool for practicing magic!?"

...I wonder if that's true? Well, I don't particularly intend to get deeply involved either. Rather, I forgot until Fran mentioned it, but we were supposed to be looking for magic tools that I can use for magic practice.

Hurriedly, I cast Appraisal on everything from A to Z.

...I have no need for magic tools that increase mana capacity.

...And I received a cane from the saint, which is a legendary item used by the former Sage...

...Those bracelets seem to be mere decorations made of gold.

...There's not really anything usable.

Well, that archbishop didn't seem like the type to practice magic diligently, either. Rather, even without expressly fishing through the archbishop's magic tools, I get the feeling that the cane I received from the saint will be more than enough for magic practice by itself.

"No, now that I think about it, I received the Sage's cane from Philine. There

don't seem to be any magic tools better than this. I'll try practicing with it."

"Is that so.

...Well, sorry for making you accompany me. It will be difficult here, so shall we return to the mansion?"

There was no harvest for me, but Fran seems satisfied. Well, I also want to try using attack magic for once in my lifetime. I'll accompany her for just a little while longer.

Chapter 71: Accidental Discharge

"That's terrific, Yuel!"

"Hahhh, Yuel-chan, you're amazing."

"Offensive magic at this age... truly incredible."

It's been a few hours since we returned to the lord's mansion. Yuel is awkwardly being showered with praise by Fran, Ruruka and Eris. A brilliantly blazing ball of flame is floating above her left hand; the result of the magic lesson from Fran.

"Even for Fran, who was once praised as a talented young lady, it took two years after she began to study magic before she was able to use Fireball. To think that Yuel was able to use it after just a handful of magic lessons..."

Behind Fran, Sera raises her voice in wonderment at the sight of Yuel casting attack magic.

...By "once praised as a talented young lady", does that mean she's not praised anymore? She's reasonably beautiful, and her magic skills are excellent, plus she's the lord's daughter. She certainly gives off that "praised" feeling.

...Most likely, her personality was the cause of her no longer being praised. I'm scared that before long, I too will be labeled as a pervert or something and stop being praised.

"Well done, Yuel."

"Yes!"

From all the praise, Yuel becomes bashfully delighted. By the way, I still can't use magic. Fran's lesson lasted several hours, but the only one who could use attack magic was Yuel. From sleeping together with me every day, Yuel's mana capacity most likely crossed the minimum threshold for attack magic. Although I get the feeling that her being able to use it so quickly is mostly due to her mana

manipulation sense and innate talent. And it seems like she'll be able to use healing magic, too.

"Yuel is a prodigy indeed. I would hire her right this moment as my escort."

"Maaan, you sure are amazing. Fran sometimes teaches me too, but I can't use it at all yet."

"In the future, Yuel-chan could even become the Grand Wizard..."

"T-That's not..."

Perhaps embarrassed over the continuous praise, Yuel starts to tug on her bangs and hide her face. She must not be that used to being complimented. Adorable.

"Incredible, Yuel. As expected of my Hero."

Of course, I'll pat her head and praise her even further.

—Although, something tells me I need to show some dignity here as her master. It's uncool for me to be unable to use attack magic even though Yuel can. And she found out about Appraisal, so as her master I have to reestablish my worth a little.

...But how do I infuse my mana?

Even if I try to imbue my cane with mana, maybe because I can't really form a good image for attack magic, my mana shows no sign at all of flowing out. And yet I can easily invoke healing magic.

...I wonder if I have to properly remember the chant or something, after all?

...Or maybe I should form a more accurate image for the attack magic?

Look, like this, imagine inert organic matter floating in the air, combine it with oxygen and make it combust, then steadily accelerate that with mana....

—That instant. I feel a sensation like some sort of restraint popping off.

"Whoahh, oohhhhh!?"

If I had to compare it to something, an avalanche. It's like I was trying to tip a

wine glass, but ended up toppling a massive water tank, that sort of surging intensity. I feel my mana flow endlessly into the cane with tremendous force.

"O-Oh man...!"

...Oh man, this is dangerous!

When I sense the danger I try to cut off the flow of mana, but I can't stop my mana by my own will.

...With this amount of mana, what's going to happen when the spell is finished? This isn't my usual healing magic. I can't begin to imagine how far it will extend, or how powerful it will be. Fireball is attack magic that emits high-temperature flames.

—Accidental discharge.

Those words cross my mind.

"...You mustn't!!"

Suddenly, a hand comes in from the side and knocks the cane out of my grasp. The cane falls to the ground, and the mana disperses without materializing.

"S-Shiki-sama, just now...! Was that offensive magic...?"

It's the saint. How long has she been here? No, maybe she just happened to pass by. She's terribly flustered, breathing heavily as she looks at me.

"Y-You saved me, Philine! T-That was close!"

The flow of my mana into the cane completely stopped when it fell from my hands. The mana that used to be gathered within me leisurely returns, attempting to meld back into my body. Looks like it's over.

...She really saved me. Without a doubt, that one was "dangerous".

"I-It was only supposed to be... magic practice..."

Did Fran sense the strange signs as well? She's gawking at me and the saint

with a frightened face. Like she was about to cross a street and a 10-ton truck came barreling right past her, that's the kind of expression she's making. Most likely, she felt the disturbance from my abnormal flow of mana just now. Yuel started to stand up too.

Ruruka, Eris, and Sera are staring at Fran in puzzlement. Somehow, it seems that Fran, Yuel, the saint and I were the only ones who noticed the crisis.

"I am terribly sorry, Shiki-sama. I should have told you sooner."

After briefly surveying the scene, the saint lets out a single sigh. Then, perhaps comprehending the situation, she calmly begins to weave her words.

"Shiki-sama's mana cannot be handled so easily. The former Sage-sama once accidentally discharged offensive magic and vaporized an entire mountain by himself. And at that time, he too was swallowed up by his own magic and met his end, according to church documents. This matter has been kept secret from all but the highest-ranking priests, however..."

An entire mountain. That expression most likely isn't an exaggeration or anything. There was the power of the cane as well, but my mana alone was being amplified to such a degree that I wouldn't be surprised if that level of damage happened. If I hadn't let go of the cane, the whole city might have been annihilated.

"...!"

Looks like they've realized what sort of situation we were just in. Ruruka, Eris and Sera are speechless.

"Shiki-sama. I think you ought to consider that a Sage-sama can only handle the type of magic in which he specializes. Before he was summoned, the previous Sage-sama was employed as a sealer of spirits, and on this side he was only able to use sealing magic."

I wonder if the previous sage was an exorcist or something?

...That feeling earlier, the flow of mana was like a turbulent river. I've released too much mana before when I accidentally fired off healing magic, but

compared to that, the one just now was on another level entirely.

Comparing mana flow to water pipes, the times I accidentally fired off healing magic felt like yanking a faucet open forcibly. But that last one felt like trying to use a rusty, decrepit supply line, and then having the water main explode. The fact that I can only handle my field of expertise, healing magic, was made abundantly clear just now.

"Shiki-sama, most likely you too previously excelled at healing-related talents.

...You absolutely must not use offensive magic, for which you have no aptitude."

"Y-Yeah. I'll take that to heart."

Fran tried to teach me magic, but sorry, I don't think I'm gonna try to use attack magic anymore. Yeah, that was way too dangerous. The way I am now, there's no way I could control it. I'm confident about that.

"Um, the previous Sage-sama losing his life due to his magic going out of control... is that confirmed?"

Eris inquires of the saint. For Eris, who studied at a church, the truth might be shocking.

"...Indeed it is. I presume you are aware that near the royal capital, there is a remarkably effective sacred ground? That place is said to be the location where the former Sage-sama died from the accidental discharge of magic. And that the flesh and blood of the Sage-sama, returned to the soil, gather mana from the surrounding area. It is said that shortly after Sage-sama's death, the effect was dozens of times higher than it is today..."

Then, as she's explaining to Eris, the saint's body leans unsteadily. At once, I support her body with my hand.

"Whoops... you okay? You lost your balance there."

"T-Thank you very much."

I was all worked up earlier about my mana running amok so I didn't notice, but now that I think about it, her complexion is awfully pale. The term "pallid"

would be appropriate.

"S-Saint-sama! I knew it, please rest for a while! Certainly, the succubus must be subjugated as soon as possible, but there is no point in Saint-sama working yourself to death! You need not concern yourself with what the bishop said!"

Astel, who had approached beneath my notice, admonishes the saint in a strong tone. She must have been erasing her presence this whole time. Now she's staring earnestly at the saint's face with an extremely worried expression.

...Now that I think about it, I get the impression that ever since the succubus' revival, the saint has been running around constantly. In place of the lord, whose evil-god-related knowledge is sparse, the saint has been directing the knights and filling him in. But the succubus likely can't make a move on me or the saint anymore, so I think it'd be fine for her to relax a little. I wonder if that means it's related to what Astel said about a bishop?

"What do you mean by "What the bishop said"?"

"...Ah, yes. The reinforcements we requested from the royal capital for the battle with the succubus apparently arrived at this city not long ago, and it would seem that those reinforcements are accompanied by a bishop from the royal capital as well. Accordingly, I am under investigation over the fact that the succubus resurrected in my presence, and was allowed to escape numerous times.

Reinforcements from the royal capital, huh? Oh yeah, we did call for them. In the end, they didn't make it in time for the succubus battle, though.

"That's not fair! Aside from Saint-sama, nobody else saw through the archbishop's scheme or tried to quash it! That bishop didn't do a thing; he has no right to criticize Saint-sama! That bishop is merely searching for material he can use to attack Saint-sama and snatch the rank of archbishop away from her!"

Astel is indignant.

...I more or less get the idea. The saint hails from the royal capital. Based on what Astel just said, the saint must hold the position of archbishop with jurisdiction over the royal capital area. And, aiming for that position, this bishop from the royal capital is using the fact that she couldn't prevent the succubus'

revival to pick a fight with her. Is that about right? It's an internal power struggle within the church.

"Ahh, sounds a bit tough. But, well, shouldn't you get some rest? Look, like Astel said, if you keel over then you'll lose everything, right?"

"No, until we capture the succubus, there is a mountain of work I must attend to. The truth is, the succubus was revived right before my eyes, and I allowed her to escape on two occasions. And D'arnaud is no longer around to bear the responsibility, so if someone must take the fall for this matter, it will doubtlessly be me.

...At this rate, if the succubus is not apprehended, at the next pontifical conclave, it would not be unthinkable for me to lose my position."

...That reminds me of something that Astel mentioned. That the saint, who has gone and purged countless rotten priests, has many enemies. Most likely, if the succubus isn't captured before they have the next bishop conference or whatever, the saint's position will really be in danger.

"...Moreover, that bishop cannot be trusted. I have no concrete evidence yet, but one of my subordinates reported the possibility of his collusion with slave merchants. That bishop must not be afforded even the slightest possibility of becoming archbishop."

To add to that, according to the saint, there's a good chance that this bishop from the royal capital is on the rotten priests' side. If such a person is appointed to a higher position, the saint won't even be able to protect her own body.

"Currently, corruption is rampant within the church. Because of that, many orphanages and nursing homes have gone under due to financial difficulties, and innocent young children are sold into slavery against their will.

...That is inexcusable. And I am the only one who can correct the present situation, by throwing my weight around in the church as a descendant of the Sage. That is why I must not lose my archbishop position yet."

Then, with a noticeably fatigued expression, the saint elaborates.

...Somehow, I feel like I'm gradually starting to understand this person known as the Saint. Wanting to reform corruption and rescue the weak. Most likely, those are the saint's genuine feelings.

If I really think about it, the saint's actions did actually give off that impression. She performed treatment free of charge during the festival, and gave her own ring to an orphan whom she was unable to heal. And her use of shells to accumulate piety and raise her healing magic ability, that too might simply have been for no other reason than to be able to treat more people. Then there were her past purges of priests. For her to continue doing those purges, which most likely didn't bring much merit to the saint herself and even created enemies for her within the church, that too was solely for the sake of saving the weak.

The weak — that's right, for example, those like Yuel. The first time I saw Yuel, she was in an absolutely terrible condition. Going from an orphan to a slave, without any decent medical treatment she was just waiting for death. If the church's corruption isn't corrected, there will most likely be more cases like hers from now on.

...Kinda seems like the saint really has it rough. Yuel is glancing back and forth between me and the saint out of concern, too.

Oh well. In front of Yuel, I can't very well refuse to extend my hand to a person in need, can I?

"Just because you're "a descendant of the Sage", there's no need for you to shoulder every single burden by yourself or anything. A genuine Sage is right here."

I'll help her out a little. Besides, if she collapses here, it seems like there'll be all sorts of trouble for me as well.

"Is there... anything I can do?"

I offer tentatively. I doubt I'd be able to do things like command the knights or coordinate between all the cities, but there's gotta be something I can do.

...Like, uh, m-magic tool appraisal?

When I do, the saint looks at me in surprise like she wasn't expecting me to ask. After that, she makes a determined expression for a moment, then turns back to me and smiles.

"Yes! Certainly, Shiki-sama! By all means, join me in the bath, and let us wash away our fatigue!"

""B-Baaaath!?"

Before I can question her, Eris and Ruruka's shocked voices reverberate throughout the mansion.

Chapter 72: Mixed Bathing

Mixed bathing is not permitted. Or at least that's what Fran started to kick up a fuss about as the knights forced her to leave while the saint headed to the bath. After that, paying no heed to the glances of the nearby knights, the saint entered the dressing room with me, took off her clothes right alongside me, casually washed her body, and submerged herself in the bathwater along with me and Yuel.

Since the water in the bath is cloudy, I can't particularly see anything, but before that she acted completely indifferent about what was visible. In fact I did see quite a bit, and she didn't try to hide anything when I looked, either.

...This saint, she manages to do things with composure that Eris and Ruruka couldn't pull off. Although from the saint's perspective, this too is most likely just another part of her succubus countermeasure plan or whatever.

"Master, this bath is so wide!"

"Y-Yeah, it sure is. Incredibly wide."

Eris and Ruruka are still in the dressing room. Since the saint entered, maybe they're hesitating over whether or not they should enter as well. The fact that they came along this far may mean that they tentatively intend to get in with us, but in the end they're likely embarrassed over crossing the line that they drew. It seems like they're going to come in, but they aren't actually entering.

"..."

As for the saint, even though she was all for getting in beforehand to the point of calling her pushy, she hasn't said a word since we entered. She's done nothing but close her eyes and soak in the water. Since her eyes are closed, I wonder if that means I can look as much as I want? Not like her body is all that much to look at, though.

But... all the same, this is awkward. And look, the saint is more or less a beautiful woman as well. Her damp, glossy black hair which she tied up so as to keep it out of the water, and the nape of her neck which is visible beneath it,

are giving off a somewhat nostalgic appeal.

Should I start talking about something? As far as subjects that would get a response from the saint, would something along the lines of the Bible be the best bet after all?

...On that note, I remember one thing that bothered me when I was reading the Bible. For starters, I'll try making that the topic.

"Hey, Philine. Come to think of it, why did the evil god start attacking humanity? I read the Bible, but I didn't really understand that part."

"Fwa, fwaihh!?"

The saint's shoulders jump with a jolt, and she makes a hysterical noise.

"Nnnnh, y-yes! W-what? W-What did you ask of me...?"

Trying to smooth over the noise she just made, the saint turns back towards me and replies. Somehow it seems like she wasn't listening. Moreover, she looks considerably shaken. Was the sound of her own voice that embarrassing? The saint's cheeks redden.

...By some chance, although she was fine with getting in together, perhaps she's more nervous than expected now that we're actually here. Well, someone with a title like Saint wouldn't exactly have taken many baths with a man. It was her idea, though.

"The evil god, I said, the evil god. It's a question that came up when I was reading the Bible. Why has the evil god been treating humanity as an enemy and attacking us?"

"A-Ahh... is that what it was about...? Well, the reason the evil god attacked humanity is, strictly speaking, yet unknown."

Once the saint determines the reason I called out to her, she sighs in relief. After that, trying to conceal her shame, she twirls her moist black hair with her finger as she continues to speak.

"You don't know?"

"I am afraid not, however... one theory is that he wanted to destroy the labyrinths, or so it has been said."

"...The labyrinths?"

That was a slightly unexpected answer. The conflict between the evil god and humanity. Assuming a reason exists, from the "evil god" naming convention I figured it would be a religious reason... like "The world ought worship my greatness alone, therefore let humanity be destroyed for your belief in other gods!" or some sort of reason like that.

"Yes. Shiki-sama, are you aware of what sort of entities the labyrinths are in the first place?"

"Ah... I know they've been called a bunch of different things... a trial given by god, or gigantic living beings, or the remains of ancient ruins. But I heard that actually, nothing is known about them."

When it comes down to it, I don't know what the labyrinths are. They're a completely separate environment where monsters don't leave corpses when they die. A magical system of drops and treasure boxes with an unknown creator. And so far nobody has reached the bottom of one; that's how mysteriously deep they are.

Even in this world where magic exists, labyrinths are rather bizarre entities. There are rumors about them, but I can't state any of them with certainty. And the same should go for the saint.

"I believe that they truly are a trial presented by god."

However, the saint looks me in the eye and asserts that.

...A trial from god, huh? A fitting response from the Saint. I'm not really the type to believe in such things, though. If I had to say, I'm more the type to go along with the idea that they're ancient ruins from the height of an advanced civilization.

"A trial from god, hmm... what makes you think that?"

"A few months before the evil god commenced an invasion of humanity, the former Sage-sama was summoned to a certain labyrinth city. Before he was

summoned, Sage-sama was supposedly an elderly man, but when he arrived in this world, for some reason it was in the form of a strapping young man, according to records. And the same applies to Shiki-sama as well. I know not your original age, but you were summoned to this labyrinth city a few months before the succubus was revived... isn't that right?"

"Y-Yeah. That's true, huh. Right when I thought I died in my previous world, I was here in this labyrinth city. I don't think my age was any different than it is now, though... but now that you mention it, my wounds from being stabbed by the slasher were healed, and my clothes weren't stained with blood."

Listening to the saint's speech, I recall the time when I was summoned.

...I was stabbed by a slasher, thought I was dead, then ended up here in this labyrinth city. But back when I arrived in this city, my clothes weren't dirty and I didn't have a fatal wound. Judging from the saint's words, the godlike being who summoned me most likely summons their Sage in the prime of his youth. I was already around the age that could be called the prime of my youth, though, so my outward appearance didn't change.

"I think of the labyrinths scattered around this world as points which god uses to interfere with the world... perhaps even to turn back time, an apparatus for the sake of sending in the Sage-sama when the world is at the peak of a crisis."

Points which god uses to interfere with the world. Assuming there really is a godlike being watching over the world, that means they're some sort of gates in order for the will of that god to influence the world?

"At the deepest depths of those countless labyrinth floors protected by monsters, there is surely something there. I presume that if one were to surmount the trial known as the labyrinth, perhaps they would be able to make contact with god.

...The evil god, in the course of his advance into the territories of mankind, invariably destroys each and every labyrinth city along his invasion route. For humanity, labyrinths are one of our important resources. There is also the

theory that he lays waste to them out of a desire to deal a blow to humanity, but... I believe that the evil god is attempting to strip away god's contact with this world; that is the impression it has given me."

"To strip away god's contact with the world, huh..."

"...Well, to this day, after hundreds, even thousands of years, none have ever reached the depths of a labyrinth. I have no means of confirming it."

As expected from saint, I suppose; she comes back with an original point of view which I've never heard before. But I could do without all the god talk and the profundity; she's going off in a direction that's a little difficult for me to wrap my head around. Honestly, it reeks of suspicion. Yuel is listening and nodding with great interest, but my interest has already shifted over to the silhouettes of Eris and Ruruka in the dressing room.

"Thank you, Philine, you've been a great source of information."

"I was under the impression that Sage-sama did not hold much interest in the Bible... that is to say, I am quite pleased. If there is anything else you do not understand, please, feel free to ask me anytime."

When I thank her, the saint says that and smiles pleasantly.

...Being that she's the saint and all, maybe she enjoys discussing the Bible like this. It's the kind of smile that makes me want to apologize for not properly listening.

Also, I wonder if this is because the saint is immersed up to her shoulders in the cloudy water, but by concealing her lack of chest, it gives off the illusion that there's something there. Talking to her face-to-face like this, I'm starting to get like *that* a little.

...This has become somewhat unnecessarily awkward.

"Y-Yeah, next time there's an opportunity..."

Let's temporarily clear the stuff about the saint from my head. And there are other things to be concerned about. Look, like the other side of the dressing room that's vaguely visible through the frosted glass.

...But man, to think that my second chance would come in this form. The saint is really doing something nice for me. And now that I think about it, the saint was the one who told Eris and Ruruka to stay by my side as well.

She also ordered the knights to remove Fran when she tried to prevent us from entering the bath. The knights seemed unsure over whether to obey Fran or the saint, but in the end they listened to the saint. Fran, who was shown their difference in popularity, made just a bit of a wounded face as she submitted to being carted off to her room. I felt a little sorry for Fran, though.

"Master, I wonder why the water in the bath here is cloudy?"

As I'm recalling that, Yuel speaks out to me. Looks like she's taken an interest in this clouded water.

"Yeah. Doesn't look like there's a hot spring coming out, so... they're probably using bath additives or something."

"Bath additives?"

Is she not familiar with those? Yuel tilts her head. I may as well give her an explanation.

"...It's a little slippery, so probably something in the alkaline group. Yuel, bath additives are things you dissolve in a bath to..."

—Then, the moment I decide to explain, from the direction of the dressing room, there's a noise like a sliding door opening.

"...!"

Reflexively, my head turns in the direction of the dressing room. It's Eris and Ruruka. The two of them have come into the bath.

"I-I wonder if it isn't a little too early for this sort of thing after all..."

"B-But Saint-sama got in too, so we can't afford not to enter."

♦ エリス ♦

♦ ルルカ ♦

「や、や、やはり。
こうしたのはちょっと
早かったんじゃないかしい……！」

「で、でも、聖女様も入っちゃつたし。
入らないわけにはいかないって」



Eris has a towel wrapped around her body to conceal her voluptuous breasts. Ruruka, perhaps feeling my gaze, lowers her head in embarrassment.

This huge bath is spacious. Because it's a bath, there's steam in the way and the area around the entrance isn't very clearly visible. But if I can't see, I can just keep watching until they come into view. At this point, no matter how much I look there's no problem. This isn't peeping or anything. It's consensual mixed bathing. Looking won't make them mad and it won't be called sexual harassment either.

Eris and Ruruka lightly wash themselves while covering up, and enter the basin. Then, perhaps relieved due to the cloudy water, they come closer without hesitation.

The two of them are silent, perhaps feeling ashamed. But this distance is close enough that if I just reach out a little, I could touch their skin. I wonder if touching would be okay? It's fine if I end up touching them, right? They said they love me and all.

As I'm considering it, within the cloudy water, I feel the soft sensation of something touching my hand. A thin, gentle finger. Timidly, someone's hand comes into contact with mine.

"..."

When I glance in the direction the hand came from, I meet eyes with Eris. Eris looks at me and cracks a small smile, then tenderly strokes my hand from above. After that, she shyly turns her eyes away from me.

—The scene from this morning plays back in my mind.

When Eris told me that she loves me. When she endured the heckling from the knights, and said she wanted me to choose her.

And even now, Eris is still touching my hand beneath the cloudy water. Without anyone else noticing, she's continuing to tenderly, affectionately stroke my hand.

...Hell, shouldn't I just push her down now? I feel like it would be rude *not* to, that's the kind of situation we're in. I mean, it was already like *that* just from taking a bath together with Eris, so in this state of being touched by her, I can no longer endure. The walls of my reason are rapidly crumbling. Like the time when I was manipulated by the succubus, my head feels like it's simmering to a

boil.

Currently, Eris isn't wearing anything. As it is, if I grasp her hand as it strokes mine and pull her out of the bathwater, I'll see her naked as the day she was born.

That reminds me, back during the battle with the succubus, Eris was saying "I will do whatever you want". Isn't now just the right time for her to fulfill that promise? Together with Eris, we'll get out of this cloudy water and...!

—The term "cloudy water" makes me remember.

My gaze turns to the place where Yuel was a while ago. When it does, Yuel is still there, looking at me with the same expression as before. Seems like she's been watching me this whole time. Hold on, I'm pretty sure my conversation with Yuel got cut off halfway through and I ended up watching Eris and Ruruka for a while.

...Has she noticed the fact that I've been staring blankly at them? I'm a bit uneasy.

"Master, umm... may I sit on your lap?"

When I search Yuel's expression, she suddenly blurts that out.

...By some chance, from watching me look at Eris and Ruruka, Yuel may have gotten a little lonely. She's fine with a harem, but to have me cut short my conversation with her, not to mention completely stop looking at her, it likely made her sad.

If it's just sitting on my lap, that's not a problem. I've let her sit on my lap before while I washed her hair, too.

—But it's impossible right now. Absolutely impossible.

I'm currently in the bath with Eris, Ruruka, and the saint. The saint has taken a little distance, and the water is cloudy, so I can't see any of her important parts. But Eris is stealthily brushing my hand with hers beneath the cloudy water, and as for Ruruka, she's close enough that our shoulders could touch.

What's going to happen when a healthy young man gets thrown into such a

situation? That goes without saying. Since the water is cloudy, nobody has noticed. Not even Yuel.

But if she sits on my lap, without a doubt she'll find out from the sensation.

Both of us are only covering our fronts with a towel. I mean, just having a towel in front isn't going to hide it. And it's not like she's wearing panties, nor does she have pants on. We're in a state of extremely low defensive power.

What's going to happen when Yuel lowers her waist onto my lap in its current state? Imagining it, that's all the more reason not to let her sit there.

"Pardon me, Master."

Perhaps taking my silence as a positive response, Yuel slowly tries to lower her waist down onto me. No good. She's on the wrong course. An accident will occur.

"Y-Yuel!"

When I call her name, Yuel's movement stops for a moment. But I don't know what to follow it up with.

"W-Well..."

...Thus far, I've always listened to Yuel's requests on the level of "I wish to sit on your lap". I've never declined her modest wishes, and after she sat down I'd repeatedly pet her head. Yuel must be thinking "he'll let me sit there". So in order to stop that, I need to give her some sort of valid reason. If I don't, she might misunderstand that I've come to hate her, and feel hurt. But what, what should I say...?

"...?"

As I'm at a loss for what to say next, Yuel tilts her head and begins to lower her waist again to sit down. Thus far, I haven't denied one of her requests. Silence is permission; perhaps she decided that.

Yuel's tiny tooshie dips into the cloudy water. This is bad. There's no more time. Only a few dozen centimeters left. At this rate, if Yuel's body traces an accurate trajectory in accordance with the laws of physics, then its point of impact will without a doubt be...!

But I can't come up with a diplomatic reason to get Yuel to stop. And since I took too much time deliberating, I may not even make it in time to stop her body by physically catching it. It's no good, I worried too much about my dignity.

The scene of Yuel submerging her body into the basin plays out in slow motion.

Once Yuel's body finishes sinking deep into the bathwater, it's the end for me. As a human being, as an adult, it'll all be over.

—She might foster some doubts, but all I can do is stop her with physical strength.

I may not make it in time, but I have to try somehow. I quickly move both of my hands to support Yuel's hips.

—However, Eris' hand on top of mine obstructs it a bit.

I hesitate for the slightest moment over whether or not I should shake off her hand. However, it's a fatal delay. One which could spell the difference between life and death.

My hand won't make it in time...! Yuel's body is sinking into the cloudy water...!

It's hopeless now.

...I know I was just thinking that all that god stuff smelled suspicious and that I don't believe any of it, but at times like these, everyone prays to god. Somebody, anybody, help me. In my last few moments, I sincerely pray to god.

—And, my prayer is answered.

"It's the succubuuus! The succubus has coooome!"

A knight's rough bellow resounds throughout the mansion. Yuel's body immediately freezes just a short distance away from mine. From the bottom of my heart, I thank the evil god!

Chapter 73: Escape from the Bath

Repeat attacks from the succubus. One was yesterday's large-scale raid, another was this morning's attack, and this marks the third assault overall. But no matter how many times she comes, it's the same thing. This mansion's defenses won't fall to the succubus alone. Once again, she won't last more than a few minutes before she turns tail and runs.

—Or so I thought.

"W-What is it!? What the hell is happening!?"

"The lights are going out...!? Shit, I can't see a thing! The succubus went off somewhere!"

"Those bat-shaped monsters... c-could they be Light Eaters!?"

However, against my expectations, the frantic voices of knights can be heard from all throughout the mansion. Somehow, it sounds like this time the succubus has brought monsters.

"...Shiki-sama, let us leave this place and quickly rejoin the knights."

Perhaps sensing the turbulent atmosphere, the saint makes a suggestion. However, before I can proceed with her proposal, I notice that something's wrong.

—The lights are going out. Along with the sound of something breaking, the lights in the dressing room are steadily going out.

"Those things, don't tell me they're...!"

Ruruka shouts when she sees the spectacle. And, at the same time, several bat-like monsters crash through the frosted glass between us and the dressing room and break into the bath.

"W-What!?"

"I knew it, those are Light Eaters!"

Ruruka says in response to Eris' shriek.

"L-Light Eaters?"

"Light Eaters are, y'know, monsters that persistently attack sources of light. I think they live in caves around this area, so maybe the succubus brought them...!"

Apparently those bat monsters are called Light Eaters. And the fact that the lights are going out is seemingly the work of those monsters as well. But even if we try to intercept them, as you'd expect, we're not armed in the bath.

"Kyaaa!"

"Aaaah, the lights...!"

In the blink of an eye, all of the lights in the bath are destroyed.

"O-Oi, is anybody hurt?"

"I-It's fine! Light Eaters don't attack people! I think they'll probably fly off right away to find other lights!"

Along with Ruruka's voice, I hear the saint and Yuel both confirm that they're safe.

I was going to confirm Eris' safety as well, but somehow it seems that won't be necessary. There's a sensation touching my back with a mass that can only belong to Eris. The sensation of something soft being squeezed against me.

...I wonder if she was scared because monsters suddenly attacked? Or else, was she actually trying to protect me?

"O-Oi, Eris..."

But it's not like Eris is wearing anything right now. If she sticks to me in these circumstances, that soft sensation touching my bare back will be risky in various ways.

"...! T-That's, I-I'm sorry."

"N-No, it's fine. I-It's totally fine."

Has she realized the situation? Eris practically bursts off of me.

...I'm glad it's dark in here. If there had been visual information as well, I might have acted on my instincts even with Yuel watching.

"B-But man, I really can't see a thing, huh..."

"This is an unfavorable situation indeed. The knights seem to be in disarray as well. We must meet up somehow or another... perhaps we ought to have called someone, some female knights, into the bath with us."

"It's a bit late to say that now. For the time being, let's get out of the bath... Yuel!"

There's also the option of waiting until my eyes adjust to the dark, but right now we need to meet up with the knights immediately. The only thing we can do here is have Yuel, who is effective in darkness, lead us to the exit.

"Master, this way."

Yuel takes my hand and begins to pull. Looks like she intends to escort me to the exit like this. That's Yuel-san for you. She's incredibly reliable.

...But the dressing room glass was definitely broken. Yuel may very well avoid it, but I'll likely end up stepping on it inadvertently.

"Yuel, give me live commentary so I can understand the situation too."

I give Yuel proper instructions so that she'll share information with me as well.

"Understood. Well then, Master, I will lead you by the hand. First, we will get out of the bathwater. There is a significant level difference, so please step high to climb up."

"Yeah, got it, Yuel."

In order to get out of the basin, the first step is to climb up following Yuel's directions. I reach up out of the water with my right leg, take a big step, and climb out over the invisible raised edge.

-Then, my foot slips.

"W-Whoaaahh!?"

Against my will, my body tilts forward.

—As for why I'm falling down, my mind begins to consider the possibilities.

Bath additives. It's those. When you get into an alkaline hot spring, there's that phenomenon where your skin becomes slightly slippery. That slipperiness caused my foot to slide...!

"M-Masterrr!?"

I hear Yuel shriek. I feel myself falling down, but I can't see a thing in this pitch-black darkness. Nor do I know where I should put my hands, so I most likely can't perform a safe fall either.

However, that instant, something supports my body. Most likely, Yuel saw me about to fall over and is doing her best to hold me up. But with Yuel's physical strength, she can't stop me when I'm already in the process of falling. I just take her right with me as I fall over onto the floor.

"Ow ow ow..."

There's a dull pain in my head, but no sensation of crushing Yuel. I vaguely tried to hold my hands out toward the ground, but looks like I somehow managed to support my own body weight.

"M-Master is, M-M-M-Master is... o-on top of me...!"

...By some chance, Yuel might have hit her head.

I call out to her to confirm that she's safe.

"Yuel, are you okay?"

"I-I am fine! I-I am, I am fine whenever!"

She seems okay. I don't really get what she means by "fine whenever", but at least she doesn't seem to be seriously injured. I feel a little relieved.

"Ah, c-commentary. I was giving live commentary! Umm, currently, above my nude body, Master's nude body is hanging over me. T-The distance is so close that we are nearly touching. M-My heart is beating like crazy."

...I can't feel relieved at all. I wasn't saying to comment on those aspects.

Situation report aside, I'm not asking her to go so far as confessing her inner feelings.

"W-Wait a minute, you, what are you doing!?"

"You pushed her down!? D-Did you just push Yuel-chan down!?"

Eris and Ruruka didn't understand the situation very well, but thanks to that report, it sounds like they do now. This is bad.

"The towel has come off as well, so Master is currently not wearing anything. A-, a-, a-a-a, amazing... it's amazing..."

What is she calling amazing? In this situation, Yuel is the only one who can see clearly and distinctly in the dark. But as for me, I don't have the slightest clue what's going on. Yet Yuel is barely squeaking out her voice, repeating "it's amazing, it's amazing" over and over.

"I-I'm embarrassed, and my face is hot. But, I'm really happy."

I can hear Yuel's voice, almost like a whisper in my ear.

...No wait, she really is whispering into my ear. There's the sensation of Yuel's sigh-like breath getting trapped in my ear. I can't see well, but we must be very close.

I only have a vague understanding of the situation, but in any case, I'm starting to feel like things will get awkward if we don't separate.

"M-My bad, Yuel. I'm gonna move now."

I'm currently in a posture with both hands and both knees on the ground. Yuel is most likely in a position tucked directly between my hands and my legs. I quickly move my limbs to cross over Yuel.

—That instant.

"Whoooah!"

My slippery hand slides. In my haste, I must have shifted my body weight too much. Having lost its support, my body drops straight down. I reflexively drop to my elbows and succeed in arresting my momentum, but... that was close.

"S-Shiki-sama... after all, Shiki-sama's tastes... That you had no reaction to me as well, it must have been because Shiki-sama has a taste for young girls after all..."

As I'm struggling like that, the voice of the saint coming to some sort of conclusion reaches my ears. But that is a terrible misunderstanding. I open my mouth to refute the saint. As I do,

"M-Master and I are clinging to each other, naked!"

Yuel cries out.

"Master is lying on top of me. We're stuck close together. His muscles are rugged. He's sturdy. It's very warm; I can feel Master's body temperature."

Then, as if delighted from the bottom of her heart, Yuel speaks. Now that she mentions it, beneath my body there's some sort of squishy sensation. It seems like, thanks to what just happened, I ended up pinning Yuel down for real.

Did Yuel misunderstand something? She wraps both hands around my back and squeezes tight.

"Y-Yuel, wait! My hand just slipped, that's all, my hand slipped!"

Oh man, if I don't give her an explanation, who knows what Yuel will do thanks to that aforementioned false rumor. I try my hardest to clear up her misunderstanding.

"...That's the same thing you said when you "accidentally" touched my chest before."

Eris remarks. Okay, something like that might have happened.

...Eris probably holds quite a grudge over the sexual harassment. But please refrain from bringing that up now. Seriously, stop.

"S-Shiki!? Is it true!? T-That's no good! At least not with Yuel-chan!"

Ruruka takes Eris' words seriously and starts freaking out. Then, a splashing sound rings out.

"H-Hyaaaaah!"

After that, there's a shriek and the sound of something tumbling on the ground.

...She probably fell over. Because she was being reckless, even though she can't see well.

"Ruruka-san got out of the bath, stepped on the soap and fell down. She dropped onto her butt on the floor. The towel she was holding fell into the bathwater."

Yuel calmly gives me an explanation of Ruruka's situation as well.

So she fell over after all, huh?

...But does that mean that currently, Ruruka is completely nude? That Ruruka is stark naked, on the floor, down on her ass? I can't see her, though. Even if I strain my eyes in the direction of her voice, I can't see anything.

"Master is staring intently at Ruruka-san sitting naked on her butt."

When I strain my eyes to try to look in Ruruka's direction, Yuel comments on that as well.

"E-Ehhh!? H-Hey, don't look! Don't look at me!"

"I-I can't see!"

It's no good. If I glance over, Yuel will report on it.

"E-Eris-san and Ruruka-san are both looking over here. I-It's embarrassing, but if M-Master desires it now... even if we're being watched, I'm fine with it!"

Then Yuel declares that.

When I concentrate really hard, Yuel's face appears before me. Looks like my eyes have grown slightly accustomed to the darkness. Yuel's face is right in front of my eyes. She's just a few centimeters away, taking rough, shallow breaths, staring intently at me.

"Earlier, I heard what Saint-sama was saying to Eris-san. That against the succubus, there is a very effective countermeasure. Master's se-"

"Y-Yuel, don't say any more! I don't need live commentary either, m-my eyes

are already used to the darkness!!"

Perhaps since some time has passed, the floor has become slightly visible. A-
As long as I can see this much, I should be able to make it to the dressing room
somehow.

"A-Alright, let's hurry to meet up with the knights!!"

I shout, in order to drown out Yuel's voice.

Chapter 74: Bishop

"Ah, Onee-chan! Someone said they saw you and Shiki-san go into the bath together, so I hurried over..."

"A-Aria!?"

As we come out of the dressing room, several knights who seem to be looking for us show up right in front of it. Among them, Aria appears as well.

"I kind of thought they were just talking about Saint-sama and other girls going in together, but... looks like it was true..."

What allowed them to immediately specify this location was the fact that, apparently, us getting into the bath with the saint has become a rumor. Eris is blushing in embarrassment over being seen coming out of the dressing room together with me, but it's not like anything in particular happened between anyone. And Yuel was there too, but ultimately it was interrupted halfway through by the succubus this time as well. She did save me, though.

"Hahh, if you're fine with that, Onee-chan, then I won't say anything..."

But it's embarrassing explaining those things one by one. For the time being, I decide to ignore her and let it go.

"A-At any rate, good job moving around in this darkness."

It's already getting dark outside. The knights are going around with torches, although if they carry something like that, those Light Eater or whatever monsters are likely to come over right away.

"Light Eaters approach lights. Like this, when they get close you can just take them out in a single stroke. You can do it too, Shiki-san."

No I can't.

But right on time, the knight next to Aria strikes down a Light Eater as it approaches the torch. I guess for a knight, a feat like this is par for the course. If I were Yuel, I'd probably say something like "As expected of Knight-sama!". Although I'm afraid that Yuel herself could do it too if she tried.

"H-Higiiiiiiii!"

—All of a sudden, the succubus' shriek resounds throughout the mansion.

...Most likely, the other knights are already back in fighting shape. The succubus may even have eaten a direct hit from magic or an arrow. The succubus seems like she more or less uses her head, but in the end as long as the saint and I stay in this mansion, she's not likely to get near us so easily.

"It would seem that the succubus is being driven towards the west side of the mansion. Let us hasten over as well."

As we're standing around relaxing, for some reason the saint urges us onward.

"Is it okay for us to go?"

"The succubus must no longer be allowed to escape. If Shiki-sama is there, the succubus will not likely flee so readily. In the event of an emergency, Shiki-sama can be held down with brute force. I see no issues."

...Looks like the saint has decided to use me as bait, trying to reduce the chances of the succubus escaping. Although rather than brute force, I'd prefer a development such as Eris triumphing over the succubus in a battle of seduction, for instance. I very much want a fair fight against the succubus in her own arena. Well, it'll be no laughing matter if I actually get carried off, so I guess there's no helping it.

"Master, I will definitely protect you! Since I am Master's Hero!"

"Hero... the one from the Bible? Such a cute hero you are. But knowing Yuel-chan, you may very well become one."

Aria responds to Yuel's enthusiasm. Well, if Yuel and Aria are there, we certainly won't fall behind against the succubus by herself, I figure. And there will be a bunch of other knights as well. Letting the succubus get away here and having the saint lose her standing would probably be worse.

"I'm not looking forward to fighting the succubus very much, though..."

Eris alone looks at me and mutters that in embarrassment.

"T-The windows are frozen! T-The windows are frozeeeennn!?"

The large conference room in the lord's mansion has a wide-open construction, perhaps to accomodate a large number of knights. The succubus has been confined within it. The windows are all blocked off by magic, and the only exit is swarming with knights.

I can tell from a glance. This should already be checkmate. As expected, the knights have no intention of letting her get away a third time.

"Fire, fire! She can't run anymore! Aim carefully and shoot her down!"

"Oi, go fetch more arrows! Shoot through those wings! Hinder her mobility!"

"I-lyaaaaa!! Lemme out, lemme out of heeeeere!!"

Maybe because the room is reasonably large, their attacks don't seem to be hitting the succubus that much as she flies around, but she can't get away any longer. A substantial number of arrows must have been shot already; the ceiling is starting to look like a pincushion. Numerous holes are beginning to open up on her wings. WIthout much combat ability, the succubus can't break through those iced-down windows. The rest is just a matter of time.

There might not have been any need for me to come here. Whether or not the succubus loses her desire to run, she has no means left to escape in the first place.

Rather, I feel like it was actually unwise, given the possibility that I could be manipulated. I entered the room in order to prevent the succubus' escape, but since she's been completely shut off in here, on the contrary it's safer for me to get out.

"If it's like this, it'd be better for me to leave."

Then, as I try to leave the room right after I entered,

"...! There's still, there's still hoooooope!"

the sharp-sighted succubus detects my appearance and looks at me with her red pupils.

...Oh crap. The moment I think that, there's a slight impact on my leg, and I instantly lose my sense of balance.

"Shiki-san, it's alright. I absolutely won't let you get manipulated. You're my future Onii-chan and all."

No sooner do I wonder what happened than I'm pushed down to the ground before I realize it. I manage to turn my neck to take a look, and Aria is sitting on my hips, keeping me pinned down. Even if I try to move, she's completely immobilizing my arms and I can hardly move. It's the same posture as a suspect arrested by the police, but I definitely won't be manipulated like this.

But this is dangerous in its own way. Having my desires manipulated by the succubus means that I'll end up becoming incredibly sensitive to the touch of a woman and things of that nature. Currently, Aria is literally lying on my butt. This is no good. Little sisters are *dangerous*. Harboring lust for Eris' little sister would seriously not be good. I must clear my mind of impure thoughts. My eyes wander around in search of material to distract my mind.

"Master, are you alright? Doesn't it hurt?"

As my desires are being manipulated, Yuel plops down right in front of my face. Then she begins to peer into my face from point-blank range. She's likely worried over me being pinned down and having my arms restrained. The young Yuel's uneasy expression is almost entirely filling my field of view.

—I close my eyes with all my might.

"Y-Yuel, don't worry about me. The succubus, keep an eye on the succubus for me."

But this time, although the sensation of my desires being manipulated is there, for some reason my reason is still relatively intact. Most likely, it's because the succubus isn't able to concentrate. Even now, an incredible number of arrows are in the midst of being shot at her.

"E-Evil God sama! Until I revive Evil God-sama, there's no way I'll die...!"

As I'm being restrained by Aria, I gaze at the succubus.

...Man, she sure is tenacious, that succubus. She's been continuously slipping through the storm of arrows fired by the knights for several minutes already.

The sole apostle of the evil god who's been revived in this era is the succubus, resurrected by D'arnaud. No matter how much she perseveres, reinforcements won't come to save her. But it seems like the succubus very much wants to revive that evil god.

"Master, I sense something!"

In the middle of that, Yuel cries out. At the same time—there's a thunderous roar. I shut my eyes once again from the force. When I open them, one of the windows has had its frosted panes blown off, along with the entire frame.

Aria releases me and draws her sword. I take a standing posture as well.

"W-What is it!?"

"That just now... was that magic!? Why the hell...!"

"T-This is bad! Hurry, the window! Block the window! The succubus is gonna escape!"

The succubus looks bewildered for a moment, but it doesn't seem like she intends to let this chance slip away.

"N-Now she's gonna get away!"

She makes a beeline towards the window.

"F-Fire! Absolutely do not let her escape!"

"E-Eeeek!"

Arrows from the knights fly at the succubus, but she skillfully twists her body, evading them by a hair's breadth. And escapes outside through the window at full speed.

"What was that explosion!?"

"F-Follow the succubus at once! Go now, and there's still a chance to catch up!"

Up until then, the succubus had been perfectly cornered, but a single blast of magic turned everything around. Perhaps frustrated over how close they had been, some of the agitated knights rush out of the room in order to pursue her.

...But leaving the room now is most likely a mistake. Yuel's gaze is fixed

unmoving on the broken window. The succubus certainly did run away. There's no question that she needs to be followed.

...However, there's also no question that on the other side of that window, someone is there who allowed the succubus to escape.

"Master, they're coming!"

From the broken window, several black shadows come leaping into the room.

-They're fast.

There are three shadows. The moment they enter the room, all of them race towards the saint in a straight line.

...Assassins. That term crosses my mind.

"...Protect Saint-sama!"

Perhaps due to their agitation over the succubus, the knights' reactions are delayed. Three women with daggers in hand approach the saint with a speed that my eyes can't follow.

"I won't let you near her!"

The one who moves first is Astel. She slashes at one of the assassins' legs. The assassin immediately tumbles down, stopped in her tracks.

"...!"

Following that, Yuel slashes at another assassin. The assassin seems to rapidly lose her balance and topples over sideways. Most likely, she even applied fast-acting paralysis poison. The second one is rendered helpless.

"U, Uoooooooooh!"

One of the knights jumps at the final remaining assassin from the side. The assassin is swiftly tackled to the ground. That makes three. All of them have been incapacitated. I was stunned for a moment, but in the end it's not like an assassination could be pulled off so easily under such heavy guard.

However — right before the last assassin fell.

I saw her hand make a noticeable blur. Reflexively, I stick my own hand out

between the saint and the assassin.

"S-Shiki-samaaa!?"

After a mild impact, a burning sensation runs up my arm. When I check, there's a knife lodged deep into my arm.

...Looks like that assassin threw a knife at the saint as she was falling.

"S-Shiki!? A-Are you okay!?"

"Dis-Poison!"

Ruruka panics, and Eris casts antidote magic. Eris was probably wary of poison. I immediately pull out the knife and cast EX Heal.

...Maybe it's because I got all beat up before at the church, but I feel like the sight of blood doesn't bother me anymore.

"Shiki-sama, are you unhurt!?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. No problem."

The saint looks into my eyes with an astonished expression.

...There's some surprise over having a knife thrown at her as well, but this expression is astonishment over the fact that I took the attack for her.

"I-I never thought that Shiki-sama would have a reason to protect me..."

"The former Sage was such a hero that he protected all of humanity, right? Something of this level isn't worth acknowledging. More importantly, who the hell are those guys? Seems like they were definitely aiming for Philine."

Actually, I just had a bad feeling and my body moved on instinct. Also, please acknowledge it a little. It was quite painful and all. But I'm in front of Yuel, so I have to act cool.

"Nh...!"

For a moment, the saint makes a startled expression. She's got a fantastic

poker face, so I'm pretty sure this is the first time I'm seeing this expression. However, the saint quickly changes it.

"Indeed, there is almost no mistaking that they are assassins aiming for me."

Then the saint approaches one of the paralyzed female assassins, delicately strips her clothes, and begins to grope around her chest.

"O-Oi, what are...!"

My eyes are instantly drawn to her bare skin... and there's something familiar there. A red, glowing geometrical pattern. I recognize it.

...That's a slave crest. The fact that it's glowing must mean that it's still active even now.

"...As I thought, a slave crest. Those movements... most likely, they are criminal slaves with past assassination experience, brought from elsewhere. It would seem that they have been given orders to seal their lips."

Given orders. Which means that somewhere out there, there's a person who ordered them.

"W-Who in the world would do such a..."

Eris mumbles to nobody in particular.

"There are many who would target me, but... these methods, and moreover to aim for me with this timing... the Slave Merchant Union, perhaps. They might have decided that I will be an obstacle to their exploitation of Shiki-sama."

Come to think of it, the saint was telling me to avoid doing anything to benefit the slave merchants. For a slave merchant who wanted to make use of me, certainly, the existence of the saint would be a hindrance. Who would have expected them to come with this timing, though.

"...Ultimately permitted to escape again as a result."

The saint mutters. As for what she's talking about, it's probably the succubus. Thanks to those assassins, the succubus ended up getting out. Most likely, if she was that close to dying, she won't consider approaching this mansion again

even as her petrification progresses. If that's the case, it'll become difficult to subjugate the succubus. Even if we try to track down the fossilized succubus after a few days, when we don't even know where she'll go, it will likely take a lot of time. Being unable to confirm the death of the succubus means that the saint will continue to be in danger of losing her position. Oh man, this could be a very unpleasant development.

If the saint is overthrown, the safety of her body can't be guaranteed. Besides, I'm relying pretty heavily on this saint right now. I was planning on loaning myself out to the lord here and the saint, making allies of the church and the knights of this city. If the saint loses her status, I'll have issues ensuring the safety of my own body as well.

As I'm working through those thoughts, the saint comes and asks me with a contemplative face.

"Pray tell, Shiki-sama, how do you think of me? ...You do not hate me, I trust?"

What's with this all of a sudden.

...But I'll give it some thought. A strong-willed priestess who's acting in order to rescue the weak. As a descendant of the Sage, her sense of responsibility is strong. She's kind to orphans, and adored by Astel who actually is a former orphan. Originally I wanted to keep my distance from her when I was hiding my own ability, but now that she knows about it, that's not particularly the case.

"I don't particularly dislike you... what's the matter?"

"...Is that so. I did not wish to impose upon Shiki-sama, or to exploit you overmuch... but it seems that I will need to use you as insurance. I am terribly sorry."

...Insurance? I tilt my head, not understanding what the saint is getting at, when I notice a slightly skinny, balding man come into the room. He's wearing a characteristic priest outfit, like the saint's.

"...Bishop-sama. At a time like this, what sort of business could you have here?"

I wondered who it was, but apparently this guy is the bishop from the royal

capital. For sure, this guy is the one she mentioned who's suspected of having connections to the Slave Merchant Union and stuff. The succubus ran away thanks to an attack by assassins who we believe to be connected to the slave merchants. And speaking of people who would profit if the saint loses her standing because the succubus got away...

I wonder if this guy might not have had something to do with the earlier assassination attempt as well? Most likely, the saint is thinking the same thing. It doesn't seem like she intends to say it when she has no proof, but she's looking at the bishop with a cold expression.

"I simply had to see Saint-sama, and I was given lodging in the mansion not too long ago, but I was wondering what could be causing all this noise... ohh, might you be Sage-sama? As a priest of the Church of Medine, it is an honor to meet you."

The bishop greets me reverentially. But man, his timing sure seems deliberate. To come here right after the succubus got away. Just a little later, and the saint might have been able to silence the knights and pretend the attack by the succubus never happened. Like, saying it was training for capturing the succubus or something.

"Yeah."

"Goodness, has there been a commotion?"

Looking at the collapsed assassins, the bishop says that. Is it my imagination or is he being kinda transparent? The bishop glances at the saint, as if demanding an explanation.

"Yes, but a moment ago, there was an attack by the succubus... and assassins."

"Oho! So you were finally able to subjugate the succubus! How marvelous!"

As if being able to subjugate her is only natural. With that kind of atmosphere, the bishop returns the saint's words. A slight frown appears on the saint's face.

"...No, the succubus was ultimately allowed to flee."

"G-Good heavens...! Why, that is...!"

The bishop feigns surprise towards the saint, who shuts her eyes and lowers her head as she answers.

"This will not do.

...That the succubus would be suffered to escape numerous times in this manner, why, I daresay there may even be some who claim that Saint sama is in truth an ally of the succubus; an evil god adherent.

...Nay, I do not mean to say that I believe so, simply that those who make such claims may appear."

"Y-You bastard... to S-Saint-sama...!"

When the bishop makes a statement that could be taken as an abusive remark, Astel loses her temper at the saint's side. However, the saint stifles her with a glance. The bishop ignores Astel's existence and continues talking.

"And how do you intend for responsibility to be assigned for this?"

He's likely implicitly telling her to take responsibility.

"We are currently investing all of our efforts towards the succubus' subjugation."

"Saint-sama, in that case there will still be those who do not agree. How does this sound? Why not consider leaving the subjugation of the succubus, and the care of Sage-sama, to me temporarily? At this rate, your credibility may be affected."

"I shall be looking after Sage-sama for many years to come."

The saint responds to the bishop's inquiry with a stubborn attitude. It looks like she has no intention to compromise with him. Well, I'd hate for her to give in and have this baldy looking after me, though.

The bishop takes a deep sigh.

"Saint-sama, such selfish statements are..."

The bishop uses an admonishing voice. It seems like the bishop's aim is to use this opportunity to extract some sort of concessions from the saint. –However,

the saint interrupts the bishop's speech.

"Sage-sama and I are already intimate enough to bathe together. In fact, I have arrangements to be engaged to him in a few days. As one of Sage-sama's wives, that is. ...Therefore, I should think it only appropriate for me to look after Sage-sama. For the subjugation of the succubus as well, of course I shall continue to bear responsibility."

With a shocking statement.

"E-Engaged!?"

The bishop raises his voice in surprise. I'm surprised too. With a flustered expression, the bishop looks out over the surroundings. Did he consider the possibility that the saint is bluffing?

"Come to think of it, I did hear that she went into the bath together with Sage-sama."

"Somebody saw him rubbing Saint-sama's bare breast, too."

"Sage-sama hits it off quick, huh. But if he's going that far with Saint-sama, he's going to take responsibility, right?"

The knights are gossiping. Even though the saint did it on her own, for some reason it turned into me doing it before I knew it. Why is that? I wonder if this is that difference in popularity thing? Wait, responsibility? Do I have to take it? No, if it's as one of the members in my harem, well, there's not really any problem with that, though. Plus the saint is a beauty and all.

...The saint was saying "insurance". I get the feeling I finally understand the meaning of her words. This saint plans to use my existence as a shield, forcing the church to acknowledge her own existence. My overwhelming healing power. With this absolute power, if I go all out it's enough to throw the reason for the existence of the church into question. For example, if I made a pilgrimage to every city in the country, going around casting healing magic on the entire city, the church would lose most of its work. Moreover, the church can't disregard the name of "Sage". Because the sage is an apostle of god; his very existence could even be called the will of god. The saint, by making herself the pipe that connects me to the church, is likely trying to make her position

unshakable.

"Y-You bitch!"

Did the bishop hear the knights' gossip and believe the saint's words to be the truth? His face reddens and he curses at the saint. I wonder if it's okay for someone with a position like bishop to be using such words?

But well, it's only been about a week since the succubus was revived. Excluding our conversation before the beauty contest, I've only gotten to know the saint since then, too. So for us to take a bath together to mean we're also considering getting engaged, it's definitely too soon for that. All the more so for someone in a position such as priestess where purity is demanded.

"Say what you will."

"K-Kuuuhhh...!"

The bishop must not have expected the saint to get so close to me this quickly either. His face has turned red and he's groaning in vexation. The saint glances at him in that state, then looks at me. And, making a slightly apologetic face, she whispers into my ear.

"I am terribly sorry for imposing on you. But I do not dislike Sage-sama either. I am fine with becoming one of your wives, Eris-sama and the others included.

...Therefore, though I may be inexperienced, please treat me well."

...While I was worrying over how to marry both Eris and Ruruka, somehow it turned into me marrying the saint. This is certainly outside my expectations. Wait, if I think carefully, back when the saint chased away the succubus, she did say she'd be fine with offering herself as a reward. That proposal might have been targeting this development from the beginning.

"M-Marriage...! Shiki is, getting married...?"

"She got us..."

Ruruka is in a daze. Did Eris understand the saint's aim? She holds her hand to her head and sighs. But if I say "there's no such thing" about my engagement to the saint here, the saint would lose her standing, and I would lose my supporter

on the church's side. I can't disavow this marriage. And I did end up telling the saint that I'd do whatever I could to help. Unsurprisingly this was beyond my expectations, though.

"A-And me!? What about me!?"

"Certainly, she did say that she would be fine with being one of his wives..."

Ruruka freaks out, while Eris seems to be ruminating over the saint's words from back when the succubus was repelled.

For a moment I feel like the saint could be deceiving me too... but she did say "as one of your wives". And yet I don't get the feeling that marrying someone with status makes it easy to broach the subject of a harem. This, in its own way... could be alright. After I try thinking back over today, this is an option. If I had to choose between Eris and Ruruka, I wouldn't be able to do anything. Rather, Eris has most likely already realized my intentions. She's looking at me as I inadvertently make a bit of a delighted smile, and sighing deeply. Most likely, she's guessed that I'll use the fact that I ended up having to marry the saint out of necessity, and force a compromise between Eris and Ruruka via bigamy. I avert my eyes from Eris' scornful gaze.

"Mm...?"

...When I glance outside the window, for a moment, in the distant sky, I feel like I can see a black shadow. However, it melts into the dark of night, so I'm unable to confirm its true identity.

Chapter 75: Rings

Two weeks have passed since the succubus attacked, accompanied by Light Eaters.

"Shiki-sama, I have ordered a wedding ring sample; what do you think of it?"

"Y-You sure work fast."

Our days have passed peacefully since then. There were various matters that needed to be settled, but as far as problems that demanded urgency, my marriage to the saint cancelled most of them.

The fact that the crisis over the saint losing her position to the royal capital bishop went away was especially huge. The bishop immediately returned to the royal capital afterwards, and submitted a proposal that the saint be divested of her archbishop rank in light of her mismanagement. But that will most likely end in failure. As long as she has a marriage relationship with me, the church can't cut ties with the saint.

Accordingly, we're currently in a room of the lord's mansion, making arrangements for said marriage.

"Pretty, isn't it..."

"How do I put it... it's refined, huhhh."

"M-Master, that's a very pretty ring..."

Eris, Ruruka, and Yuel are looking at the ring held out by the saint and murmuring.

—That shocking engagement announcement from the saint. Eris and Ruruka both protested to the saint afterwards, but if my marriage to the saint falls through, the odds are high that she'll lose her position, and I'll lose my supporter on the church's side for the sake of ensuring my own safety. Considering the future, now that we've allowed the succubus to escape, the saint and I need to get married at all costs. Once the saint explained that, Eris and Ruruka both understood the necessity of the marriage.

...But Eris and Ruruka both felt that the saint had no right to snatch me away. What the saint proposed in regards to their lingering resentment was — why don't the two of them marry me as well? When the saint used her clever conversational arts to suggest that to them, it went in the direction that for the sake of getting along, I'll get married to all of them.

What made the two of them give in relatively easily to bigamy when they seem opposed to it was, most likely, the fact that it started with me getting married to the saint. If Eris would be losing to Ruruka or vice versa, they might have given up, but the saint was a dark horse who wasn't even on their radar. Maybe they hated the idea of it ending in me being stolen out from under them.

I wasn't sure how to bring up the harem, but thanks to the saint, it seems like it's going to happen now in this form. For the saint, who has slogged through the underbelly of the church, this too is most likely another one of her masterful strategies. As a result, the scene I wished for is right here. Who'd have thought that she'd be this dependable as a wingman?

"Will this be acceptable?"

"Yeah, looks good to me?"

"Very well, I shall have four of them prepared posthaste."

The saint says, once she confirms our reactions. Four rings. One for me, Eris, Ruruka, and the saint.

"Four..."

Yuel bends one, two, three, four fingers as she looks at me, Eris, Ruruka, and the saint in turn. She's making a terribly lonely expression.

...Sorry, Yuel, but there isn't one for you. These are wedding rings. In the end, there's no way I can marry a girl as young as Yuel. The fact that I'm the Sage notwithstanding, I'm not immune to criticism, and I myself am opposed to marrying a young girl like Yuel. No matter how much of a harem it is, that's still going too far.

I feel sorry about Yuel's dejection, but even if we do end up getting married, it would at least have to wait a few years.

"Four... so it truly is bigamy."

Eris sighs.

...Though Eris reluctantly accepted bigamy, she occasionally gives off a feeling like this, of finding it intolerable. Most likely, she was picturing some kind of ideal monogamous married life, with two kids, back at that hospital.

"Y'know, I'm kinda starting to feel like I'm okay with it at this point."

"...!?"

Ruruka replies like that to Eris' mutterings. Eris must have thought that Ruruka shared her views; she makes a bit of a surprised expression. By some chance, is she going to lend support to my bigamy? That's Ruruka for you. I knew I could count on her.

"I mean look, I've been thinking lately. Could I get married to Shiki, just the two of us? If I did, I bet Shiki would definitely go off somewhere and cheat on me behind my back. And I mean, Shiki's incredibly lewd. And simple. And weak-minded enough to get tempted by the succubus. Plus whenever there are boobs in front of him, he never thinks of the consequences."

"...T-That may be true. But how does that...!"

"Look, the point is, if it's impossible alone then we can keep an eye on him with the two of us. Taking shifts, watching over Shiki so he doesn't cheat, right?"

I thought a nice follow-up might be coming, but instead it was a rant. I'm not particularly simple. I-I'm just a little weak to boobs, that's all. Also, please don't say such things in front of Yuel. It'll invite a misunderstanding.

"And besides, if he's gonna get married to a single person, won't it be Saint-sama, who already announced it in front of a bunch of people? I was like, "I can't stand it ending like that.""

Once Eris hears Ruruka's speech, she lowers her eyes. Most likely, as far as those two are concerned, the fact that the saint acknowledged bigamy must have been the number one point after all. Although speaking of the saint in question, she's watching the two of them and grinning. She's too bold.

Eris sits with her face frozen in a contemplative expression.

...I wonder if she's going to say that she can't accept anything but monogamy after all? But my marriage to the saint is going to be rather seriously necessary from here on out. Also, it's convenient for getting married to both Eris and Ruruka as well. It'll be a problem if Eris refuses to marry me unless she's my only wife.

...Because if she does that, I may very well end up choosing her.

However, Eris raises her head and speaks with an "oh well" attitude.

"...So long as you look at me properly, then alright. Because I really do love you."

"Y-Yeah, that's fine."

Oh I'm gonna get a real good look. On the contrary, if there's any place my eyes will reach, my eyes are pretty much drawn there already. There's no point bringing it up now. Well, I doubt that Eris meant it in that way, though. But no matter how many other women there are, I doubt I would ever lose interest in Eris. I wanna get married already. No, we're

going to get married.

Perhaps sensing that the matter is settled, the saint puts away the ring and stands up. She can never sit still, so maybe she has something else to do after this.

"...Come to think of it, concerning the assassins, one of the slave merchants has finally coughed up some information. He has confessed their involvement in the crime, so I believe that the matter can be settled with this."

The saint casually gives us a report as if she's just mentioning it offhand.

"Confessed? ...What sort of methods did you use?"

I was about to let it go, but drawing out a confession to being complicit in an assassination is impressive. I don't know the details, though.

"I have not been doing anything special. It is merely that the type of people who would kill others for money will easily betray their organization once their own body comes under threat, that is all. With this, I ought to be able to annihilate this city's Slave Merchant Union with certainty. And as D'arnaud's exploitation is no more, henceforth the circulation of donations to this region's welfare and social institutions can be greatly increased.

Seems like I'd be better off not asking what she did. Also, the Slave Merchant Union will be annihilated...? I thought it was a fairly huge organization, though. I don't want to make an enemy of this saint, that much is crystal clear.

...Assuming I become the archbishop in charge of this area as D'arnaud's successor, let's be especially careful not to exploit it.

"That reminds me, what about the succubus? Still can't find her?"

Hearing about the matter of the assassins reminded me. After that, I haven't heard a word of news regarding the succubus. I haven't heard any stories of her attacking some other church, nor any mention of succubus sightings anywhere. And I'm pretty sure there hasn't been a report yet of locating the petrified succubus.

"Indeed... by some possibility, she might have fallen to the bottom of a river or lake upon her petrification. In that contingency, locating her would be extraordinarily difficult."

"I see."

As I was afraid, it seems she hasn't been found. The saint holds a hand to her head, as if the subject has become a headache for her. But there's nothing we can do about something we can't find. About all we can do is spend a bunch of time and manpower searching all over.

"Well then, please excuse me. I believe one of my subordinates will come by later to size the rings, if you would. Ahh, and the two of you are to be measured for your dresses, so please ask her for that ahead of time."

Then, giving us only a few informational messages, the saint leaves the room. Eris and Ruruka both leave the room as well to get that done.

"..."

The only one left behind in the room is Yuel, clutching her clothes tightly and hanging her head.

Ever since Eris and the others left, I've been reading the Bible. Outside of the war between the evil god and humanity, this Bible also contains the church's precepts, and episodes dealing with its major figures. It's fairly thick. I still haven't read all the way to the end, but after all, it's unthinkable for someone lauded as the Sage, someone who could become the archbishop of this area, not to have read this. As I'm concentrating on reading the Bible and trying to get through it quickly... by the time I notice, it's gotten late into the night.

"Yuel, it's about time for bed. And there's nothing left to do today."

"...Yes, Master."

Yuel has been somewhat absent-minded since earlier. I noticed it out of the corner of my eye while reading the Bible, but she's been vacantly staring at the floor for quite a while. As I thought, the matter of the wedding is bothering her. And the way Yuel's been treated lately, it's like she's the only one left out.

"Ahh..."

I do feel like I want to do something for her somehow... but after all, Yuel is too young. And besides, no matter how much a kid says "I love you", as they grow up and their perspective expands, it's possible they'll no longer feel that way. When that happens, I don't want Yuel to feel regret. To the young Yuel, I may be something of a father figure. Until Yuel herself becomes an adult, and can exercise proper judgment, considering such talk is probably impossible in the first place from an ethical standpoint.

...But be that as it may, seeing Yuel downtrodden is still heartbreakingly. I want to give her some kind of pep talk. A feel-good talk, to subtly divert her attention so she won't cry.

"Oh yeah, Yuel. I only read it in the Bible, but supposedly that cane wasn't the only catalyst that the former Sage used for his magic. Seems like there's a legendary magical sacred sword with the same level of effectiveness as that cane."

"A magical sacred sword?"

"Yeah, that's right. If Yuel really becomes strong enough to be called a Hero, let's try asking the church to lend it to you. And you can already use a little magic, so someday I'm sure you can become a magnificent wizard as well as a swordswoman. I think it'd be just perfect for you to have."

I don't know whether or not the church would readily lend us a sword like that, but my priority here is to deflect Yuel's feelings. And assuming Yuel does gain that level of ability, I'm sure she will already be an adult by that time. Even if they refuse to lend it to her, she probably won't be that sad.

"As Master's Hero..."

Yuel murmurs, as if ruminating on my words. But the mood she's in is... dark. I figured that something like the cool sacred sword the Sage used to use would tickle her childish imagination a little, but looks like it's hopeless.

Perhaps her head is full of thoughts about my marriage. And she was so happy before when I told her about the harem; I didn't think she would be this crestfallen. But in the end, perhaps it was different when the reality that she's the only one unable to get married yet was thrust in front of her face. It's most likely not a rational thing. That alienation-like feeling that she's the only different one, even if she convinced herself, she'd still end up feeling that way.

...Looks like my only option here is *that*.

"...Yuel, it's once you grow up. You're still young. Marriage and stuff, you can think about that after you become an adult. There's not really any need to be impatient about it. Right?"

My sure-fire charm. "Once you grow up, okay?".

By reciting this, I can misdirect Yuel using her future expectations. Nevertheless, although I'm saying something close to it, I'm not actually declaring "Let's get married". It's an ambiguous approach to deal with Yuel's potential change of heart in the several years before she becomes an adult. I've managed to postpone the matter of my relationship with her before using this same method. Knowing Yuel, if this will get her to focus on the happy future of

"We can get married once I'm an adult", I can get the fact that I'm currently marrying Eris and the others to vanish from her head.

Or so I thought,

"Uuu..."

but tears slowly and steadily gather in Yuel's eyes. Her throat keeps making tiny noises like she can't bear it, and she begins to tremble.

...T-This worked out before, though.

How come? Something is different now.

But what do I do? If this method is hopeless, what should I do?

And, as I'm racking my brain, a knocking sound at the door shatters the awkward atmosphere.

"Shiki-sama, may I spare a moment of your time?"

"Y-Yeah."

It's the saint's voice. And when the saint hears my reply, the door opens.

"My apologies for disturbing you so late at night. However... as I was able to put together a little available time, I thought that I ought to make amends to Shiki-sama for forcibly pressing you into the marriage.

...Have I interrupted you?"

The saint says as she enters the room. On the contrary, she saved me. I was already running out of ideas for how to comfort Yuel. "Once you grow up" worked last time, so I thought it would distract her this time too. In any event, she can steer the conversation elsewhere.

"I don't really mind. What's up? By "make amends", you mean you're giving me something?"

"Though it may be forward of me, I am thinking of providing you with night service."

Steering it there is not good. Really not good. I wanna turn back already.

"..."

Look, Yuel is here and she's still on the verge of tears. Ahh, ah... I can tell right away from looking at Yuel that the proposal from the saint just now hit her pretty hard. The relationship between me and the saint, who's already about to initiate night service, and my purely master-and-slave relationship with Yuel. Did the saint's proposal make Yuel see things in a new light? Her expression rapidly saddens.

...I wonder if she thinks that even her presence here is a nuisance? Yuel starts to silently trudge out of the room. The usual Yuel would do something like ask "May I help?", but it seems like she's already completely disheartened. Past incidents aside, perhaps she's thinking that it's unacceptable for a slave to intrude on the intimate relationship between a husband and wife. We're not particularly that intimate, though.

"A-Ahh, Philine. C-Can we do this some other time? N-Now is sorta... look, you understand, right?"

"I don't mind if Yuel-chan joins."

You should mind. / mind.

...Wait, didn't this lady say something like it's not good to put a child through something so outrageous? As insistent as she is that unreasonable treatment is no good, I wonder if that means it's fine so long as there's consent? And now that I think about it, she isn't questioning me at all about having Yuel as a slave.

"M-Master, i-is it okay...?"

Look, Yuel reacted. No, I was going to hold Yuel back either way. Nor did I have any intention of throwing the mournful Yuel outside so the saint and I could get down to night service. Rather, I was planning on sending the saint away and comforting Yuel by petting her head, all night long if that's what it took.

But what do I do about this situation? Yuel is looking at me like an abandoned puppy. If I tell her no here, it'll end up looking like I'm rejecting her. In her current insecure condition, I absolutely can't do that.

Even though I was trying not to make Yuel sad, why does she have to suffer so much?

—As I'm anguish over it like that.

"S-Sage-sama! Saint-sama, is Saint-sama here!?"

The second I think I hear someone noisily running down the hallway, a knight's voice calls out from in front of the room. How unusual, this late at night. He seems pretty frantic.

"Yes, I am indeed here, but... can it wait? We are currently in the middle of something."

The saint dismisses the knight. However, the knight immediately retorts.

"It's urgent business!!"

His rough voice seems desperate. Perhaps feeling the serious atmosphere, the saint approaches the door.

"...What sort of business would that be?"

Then she opens it. Over the saint's shoulders, I can see the knight's face. His expression is pallid. I can clearly tell that he's quivering, and greatly shaken. Judging from the state this knight is in, it's no doubt bad news.

—However, the knight's report far exceeds my hypothesis.

"T-The royal capital, there has been word that the royal capital has fallen! T-The succubus has resurrected the evil god...!!!"

Chapter 76: Fall

"Wha...? T-The royal capital has fallen!?"

"The evil god has been resurrected...!? A-And moreover the succubus yet lives...!? G-Give me the details!"

The evil god was revived. And furthermore by the succubus, who should have turned to stone...? The saint was just saying something about night service, but she too switches her expression and demands an explanation from the knight.

"T-The details are unclear, but according to the testimony of the knights who came from the royal capital... the evil god suddenly appeared at the royal capital, sealed off all entry and exit with barrier magic, then instantly left the royal capital and commenced an attack on this city of Merhatz...!"

"He is heading towards this city!? And moreover he used large-scale stationary barrier magic!? D-Does that mean it is the genuine evil god!?"

Large-scale barrier magic.

...Within the Bible, I read about the evil god using that once. If I recall correctly, it's magic where a huge pattern is inscribed on the ground, then everything within its range gets cut off from the outside world. Though it takes time to set up, once it's invoked the effect is tremendous. Until the evil god releases it, nobody can undo it. It was supposedly an extraordinarily troublesome spell.

But... that resurrected evil god blockaded the royal capital, and he's heading towards this labyrinth city...?

"W-What does that mean...?"

—The questions keep coming.

First, didn't the succubus get petrified? The distance from this labyrinth city to the royal capital is far enough that it takes a few days even by dragon. Taking into account the advancement of the succubus' petrification from what I previously saw, she shouldn't have managed to reach the royal capital by any stretch of the imagination. And the saint was also saying that there are no

priests around here capable of using EX Heal other than me and her.

Besides, how did they end up allowing the evil god to be revived? The royal capital should've had strict security in place around the evil god's seal. Even if the succubus brought along monsters and attacked, the royal capital wouldn't fall so easily, and if she went in alone she shouldn't have been able to somehow bypass the security easily either.

"...H-Hey, in the royal capital, weren't there jewels not just for the evil god, but for the rest of his apostles too?"

"Yes, distributed in several places, but they were being kept under strict guard..."

Then why did he take such wishy-washy measures and leave the royal capital in limbo by blockading it with a barrier, to come march on this labyrinth city? If he had seized the royal capital, the country would no longer be able to fulfill its duties as a country. Besides, if he had combed the capital to search for the other apostles' sealing gems, he should have been able to find a few of them. I don't really understand the merit of leaving that place so far behind and going out of his way to march on this labyrinth city.

"The evil god and the succubus are advancing towards this labyrinth city, gathering monsters along the way... t-they are already approaching at two days' distance.

...And moreover, in exchange for guaranteeing the safety of the royal capital, the evil god is demanding that Sage-sama be brought before him, alone...!"

"T-To hand over Shiki-sama...!? ...I-Is that what it comes down to...?"

"Now I get it... so the royal capital is being held hostage...?"

The knight's remark cancels out my one doubt. The reason the evil god expressly blockaded the royal capital was to use it in exchange for me?

...Most likely, the evil god is aiming for certain victory. The Sage is the only one with the capability to oppose the evil god. In order to kill me quickly and

without resistance, he's holding the royal capital hostage and advancing towards this labyrinth city. In the case that we don't obey, I'm sure he'll have some device to blow up the interior of that barrier or something with large-scale magic.

The fact that knights came here from the royal capital is also probably because the evil god intentionally allowed them to escape in order to serve as his messenger.

"I-I will... I will protect you, Master!"

Perhaps because she heard something like "hand me over to the evil god", Yuel draws a knife. Then she forces her way in front of the knight and the saint in order to protect me.



"Please calm down!"

The saint gets flustered when Yuel points the blade at her. Before I notice, Astel wedges herself between the saint and Yuel as well. Yuel and Astel, pointing knives at each other. The atmosphere is touch-and-go.

"I-I have no intention of handing over Shiki-sama in resignation! If we lose Shiki-sama as the Sage, humanity will lose its only means of opposing the evil god. And should we hand over Shiki-sama, we cannot be sure that the royal capital will truly be returned unharmed. M-Moreover, the authenticity of this information has not yet been confirmed."

"Yuel, I'm fine. Relax."

I grab hold of Yuel's knife hand and move her behind me. Incidentally, I also reach behind my back to pet her head.

...The saint wouldn't actually present me to the evil god. At the very least, without me, it's doubtful whether they could even win against the succubus' monster troops alone. The royal capital has already been isolated and taken hostage. Considering humanity as a whole, we should abandon it at this point. And I think that the saint is most likely the type who's capable of such thoughts, even from her standpoint as the archbishop of said royal capital.

...As I'm patting Yuel's silky hair, a single thought comes to mind.

I've been thinking about it ever since I heard that the succubus resurrected the evil god. How did she heal her petrification?

—And I land on a single person who might have been capable of healing it.

"Hey... by some chance, what if the one who healed the succubus was that baldy bishop? If that guy could use EX Heal, couldn't he have healed the succubus and intentionally let her get away to make Philine lose her position or something?"

The saint was saying that she and I are the only people in this area who can use EX Heal. But what about that bishop, who came by this city afterwards? If it was that bishop, he might have been able to cure the succubus.

What if, after that raid with the Light Eaters, the succubus didn't escape right

away, but stayed close and waited for an opportunity? It's possible that she was observing the conversation between the saint and the bishop. The succubus' true strength is perceiving people's desires and taking advantage of them.

...At that time, when the bishop was fuming at the saint, she might have targeted him.

"C-Certainly, he might have had a motive to heal the succubus... but that bishop could only use High Heal at best. Healing her petrification would be extremely..."

The saint states in bewilderment. Looks like I guessed wrong. I figured that the bishop might have intentionally healed the succubus and let her get away in order to ensnare the saint. As I'm mulling it over, there's a voice from my side.

"Master, I think that petrification could be cured even with High Heal."

It's Yuel. Even High Heal can cure petrification? Does she mean that by using High Heal, the spread of the petrification can be suppressed? I haven't heard anything like that, though.

"Thinking of myself as the succubus and Master as the evil god... if it was in order to revive Master, I think I would do it."

Yuel says with a tragic expression. That harsh expression makes me realize.

—No, but, she couldn't possibly...

"If I was the succubus, I would cut off my own leg, and have it regenerated with High Heal."

Then Yuel asserts that.

...Don't tell me she really ended up comparing herself to the succubus? Yuel is making a slightly sorrowful expression. Well, from the standpoint of working hard for the sake of their master, the two of them do have something in common. And their appearances are a bit similar as well. But I don't want her feeling any sympathy or compassion for an apostle of the evil god who actually spent tens of thousands of years killing humans in biblical times.

"Remove the petrified portion along with the leg, and heal the missing leg with High Heal... I-If that is indeed the case, it would not be strange for the succubus to go on living... however, I could have sworn that the succubus' petrification was quite profound... at the time of that attack, it might very well have spread to a portion of her torso..."

The saint's shoulders shudder a little.

...Cutting off a leg is easier said than done. Injuring one's own flesh requires sufficient determination. Moreover, in that succubus' case, I doubt she could have detached the petrified portion without dismembering her leg up to its very base, the hip joint.

...No matter how much vitality an apostle of the evil god is purported to have, if she cut off her leg at the hip, very close to her torso, there would've been the possibility of death. And it's not like the succubus can use healing magic herself, so she had no definitive guarantee that her leg would be returned to normal after she cut it off. She must have known that if she couldn't get it healed, she would die of blood loss.

"...She sure is tenacious."

I don't know what makes the succubus go so far, but she must have wanted to revive the evil god at any cost.

"With the bishop's cooperation, it would have been a simple matter to find her way to the evil god's seal as well.

...Most likely, like the time with Shiki-sama, he might have been deceived and even offered to become an apostle. That bishop is a man of high pride, after all... I suppose that losing to me would have been more unbearable for him than leading the world to ruin..."

The saint reflects regretfully.

...As for the succubus, she has no reason to make him one of her followers. Setting aside whether I have good compatibility with succubus-degree abilities,

that bishop is just a priest who can use a little healing magic. Most likely, in the case that he was deceived, he's no longer alive. And being able to use up to High Heal, he must have had a fair amount of mana, so it's also possible that he was used as a sacrifice for reviving the evil god.

"Saint-sama."

A knight presses the saint as she's hanging her head with a sullen face. And the evil god is already nearing this labyrinth city; it's a race against time. I guess he wants her to hurry and give out orders.

"...Indeed, this is no time for regret. I shall go and ask the knights who supposedly came from the royal capital about the situation. And thereafter, consult with Lord-sama... it will most likely take the form of calling for reinforcements from the nearby towns again. Shiki-sama, please remain on standby in this room.

...Astel! You go and alert the knights guarding the ramparts. They are to report immediately should they discover anything unusual."

And, declaring that, the saint quickly exits the room.

I've been told to remain in my room.

...Most likely, if I were to go out, it would be unfavorable in many ways. And I'm sure there are plenty of folks with friends and relatives in the royal capital. Abandoning the royal capital would not be such an easy decision to make. The saint assuredly intends to hang onto me and stand up against the evil god, but for a while it may be difficult to unify the will of this city as well.

"Master... will it be alright...?"

Perhaps worried about the knights frantically running around outside the room, Yuel asks me with an anxious face.

...To be honest, if I had to say whether it's alright or not, it's totally not alright. Even if we call for reinforcements right now, how many knights can we possibly assemble? Most likely, the best we could do wouldn't even amount to half of

the number of knights that showed up last time. Now that the royal capital is being held hostage, we may as well already be caught in checkmate.

"It's alright. You don't need to worry at all, Yuel."

But for now, I'll reassure her. And it's not like we've lost yet. Even with hardly any knights, as long as we have my healing magic, we may still be able to turn the tables on the evil god and the succubus.

"For the time being, let's do what we can."

I reach for the Bible.

...I have a good grasp of the succubus' abilities, but frankly I don't really understand the abilities of the evil god who she supposedly resurrected. It's written that magic is his forte, but in what I've read so far, there wasn't much about what he can do or what sort of weak points he has, that type of combat-applicable knowledge. I need to understand that. I start flipping through the Bible.

—Found it.

The moment of the decisive battle between the evil god and the former Sage. On the opposite page, there's an illustration of the cane-wielding Sage and a female swordsman who appears to be the Hero. The circumstances seem to be that, while the apostles and monsters were in the midst of capturing the surrounding major cities, the Sage led a great host of 10,000 against the isolated headquarters of the evil god. When I read it in detail, the Sage apparently divided his army into a huge diversionary force and an ambush unit of a select few led by the Sage himself, and they each attacked the evil god from opposite sides. It's written that the diversionary force headed in a straight line towards the evil god through the open plains, while the ambush unit hid among the trees and approached beneath the evil god's notice.

However, reading the next sentence, I can't believe my eyes.

"...!?"

—Before a few minutes had elapsed, the diversionary force was annihilated.

The army of close to 10,000 soldiers was nearly wiped out by a single direct hit from the evil god's large-scale attack magic. Even when the surviving soldiers spread out to assault the evil god, there was nothing they could do against the excessive range of his devastating attack magic, and they were annihilated. It's written that nothing was left in their place but numerous craters and swirling clouds of dust.

"Offensive-type, large-scale magic, huh...?"

Outside of attack magic, the evil god can also use barrier magic like the one he placed over the royal capital.

...A large-scale magic expert. That's probably an apt description. Sounds like the kind of wizard I would most likely turn out to be if I learned how to use all different types of magic.

—He's a complete upgrade over me, huh...

But such an evil god was sealed by the former Sage. Holding out hope, I continue reading.

The ambush unit led by the Sage slipped into the cloud of dust and drew near to the evil god, immediately engaging in a close-quarters battle with him. Over the span of a few pages, the Bible describes the grand duel between the Hero and the evil god.

But there's no mention of magic being used within it.

...I might have figured out one of the evil god's weak points. The weakness of the evil god who uses large-scale magic is being forced to fight at close range. If the enemy gets right up in his face, he won't be able to use magic that could possibly swallow himself up along with it.

Now I get it. That means we can make a surprise attack, creep up close to our opponent so he can't use magic, and win in close-quarters combat? Well, that's how it is with things like wizards. Get close to them and they're finished, no big deal.

However, when I turn the page.

—The Hero was cut down by the evil god.

And apparently it's not like the evil god used some sort of magic to give himself an advantage. It seems that the Hero, the one known as the strongest swordsman of that era, was defeated simply via pure sword technique.

"You gotta be kidding me..."

He's the strongest class even in melee combat...? Oh man, no wonder he's called the evil god.

Whether it's at long range or short, it seems like we have no shot at winning against the evil god. As far as why the Sage was able to seal the evil god, apparently he capitalized on the momentary opening when that Hero was cut down to set off the sealing magic.

—Let's consider the contents of what I just read.

If we gather allies and fight the evil god head-on, we will no doubt suffer enormous damage from his large-scale attack magic. And the win percentage is most likely not high.

Even going with a surprise attack, he possesses sword technique that surpassed even the strongest swordsman of the era. Success won't be very easy.

...Isn't this hopeless?

The former Sage's fighting method isn't one that we can reproduce now. I don't have something like sealing magic where one direct hit is an instant win. Besides, fighting by throwing away an army of over 10,000 as a diversion would be too severe, both from a material perspective and a psychological one.

Like the time with the succubus, the saint most likely intends to gather knights, make use of my healing magic, and pull through somehow with that method.

...But that will most likely prove to be difficult. Against the large-scale magic of

the evil god, my healing magic is powerless. Their fragile human bodies will end up evaporating before I even get a chance to use healing magic. If large-scale magic is used, I likely won't be able to save the knights caught within its range.

Even before we get close enough to be in range of his large-scale magic, the succubus is there. The swarm of monsters she's bringing should slow the knights' advance. Against the evil god's massive firepower, heals won't possibly make it in time. And even if by some minuscule chance we do manage to get close, the evil god himself is a peerless swordsman. There's no chance of victory in the first place.

...And that evil god is already close enough that he'll arrive in two days.

"Master..."

My face must be looking rather pale; Yuel calls out to me.

"Y-Yeah, it's alright. T-This city has me backing it up. You don't need to worry, Yuel."

I deceive her for now, but in the end it's not alright. At least if the succubus and the evil god were coming separately, we could manage somehow. With the succubus' monster forces at the evil god's side, we can't possibly pull off a surprise attack. I don't think there's any method to defeat the evil god other than a sudden strike, though. I get the feeling there's nothing I can do to break this stalemate.

But it's not like I can give up trying to think. Being unable to win against the evil god means that Eris and Ruruka, and also Yuel, will continue to be exposed to danger. Somehow, some way, I have to do something.

As I'm racking my brain, my throat becomes dry before I notice. I stuff my hand into my item box for some water to drink. And my hand touches a certain something. I suddenly realize.

-I might have found a method to defeat the evil god.

If I head over to the evil god "by myself", maybe I can use this. With this method, none of the knights will be sacrificed in vain, either. I'll settle everything on my own.

A shot at victory. As that thought lifts my spirits, I feel like a little weight is lifted off my hips. But then there's a sensation tightly tugging on those lightened hips.

"Master... I will, I will absolutely protect you. No matter what happens, I will protect you without fail."

...So please, don't go by yourself, ok?"

Yuel pleads, as if she was reading my mind. She's clinging to me from behind, trembling a little.

"Yuel...?"

I was surprised over why she would say something like that... but most likely, it's
that.

...Back during that magic practice, when my mana was going out of control, Yuel was there. And the saint was also saying that when all that mana runs amok, it has a dreadful power to it that could vaporize an entire mountain. It might have looked like I was going to try and force a draw with the evil god using that haywire mana.

...But I'm not one to do something like blow myself up. And I have no desire to die. I haven't done anything with Eris or Ruruka yet. And besides, if Yuel ends up being left alone, she'll definitely cry.

I won't die, and neither will the knights. I'm only taking the very best approach I can think of to defeat the evil god.

"...Of course not. What could I possibly do if I go alone? Besides, I'm a total coward. I wouldn't so readily go to face the evil god by myself."

"Master, you have exposed yourself to danger countless times in order to save someone. You are an incredibly respectable, very very brave person."

When I retort, Yuel clutches my clothes tightly and says that. I can sense her will to never let go.

"It's alright. I'm right here beside you, Yuel."

...Well, I'm gonna go though.

This strategy most likely has a high win rate. Furthermore, precisely because of this timing, it's extremely likely to work. If I let this chance go, we may not be able to win against the evil god anymore. And if that happens, I'll be killed by the evil god anyway.

"...Do you mean it?"

"I mean it. Yuel's master wouldn't lie, right?"

Master doesn't tell lies. Thus far, in front of Yuel anyway, I've been a perfectly honest, kind, and respectable master. Knowing Yuel, if I say so, she should believe me.

"Yuel, until the saint calls on us, let's take a nap. Who knows when something will come up."

And, as I tell Yuel that, I decide to get into the futon along with her.

Chapter 77: Yuel

The sound of her quiet sleeping breath permeates the room. Perhaps because it's late at night as well, Yuel quickly fell into a deep slumber. I guess she's still a child after all.

...Children should get a good night's sleep.

I slip out of the futon, being careful not to wake Yuel. And, trying to the best of my ability not to make any noise, I slowly open the door to the room.

"Master, where are you going?"

Instantly, there's a voice from behind me.

...Did I wake her up when I was sneaking out of the futon? Although, this is a little awkward. There's no way I can take Yuel with me. For now, I'll mislead her.

"A-Ahh... to the bathroom."

"Master, please take me with you."

...And what exactly do you plan to do when we get to the bathroom together, I wonder? I'd prefer to decline.

"I-I really don't think that going to the bathroom together would be... Yuel, wait in the room for me for a little while."

However, Yuel circles around between me and the door and stares steadily into my eyes.

"Master, if you are leaving this mansion, please take me with you."

Then, gazing straight at me, she states it plainly.



「ご主人様、
私も連れて行つてください」

"...! Y-Yuel!?"

...Apparently Yuel has unmasked my thoughts.

Now that I think about it, when I look closely, Yuel's expression shows no signs of her being half-asleep.

...I wonder if she's been awake the whole time? B-But I made sure to confirm her sleeping breath and everything. Perhaps she was even feigning sleep?

Feigning sleep... that would mean that Yuel was convinced that I was lying...

"Master, I, I've realized lately that Master has been lying to me a lot."

"Nnnnn!?"

Then, some shocking words are fired from Yuel's mouth. H-How long ago is 'lately'? Which lies has she exposed? W-What exactly has happened to the image of me now inside Yuel's head?

-Yuel has become aware of the lies I've been telling her thus far.

I was about to go face the evil god alone in order to defeat him, but such things instantly vanish from my head. Is Yuel going to tell me "I hate this lying, dirty Master"? Oh crap. It's impossible. I can't bear it.

But if she really has noticed my lies, that would be only natural. Because Yuel loved the honest, pure, totally kind, ideal master. Yuel wasn't looking past the facade that I had built out of lies.

"...Y-Yuel... that's, I'm sorry. I'm not the respectable master that you thought I was."

Most likely, there's no point in trying to mislead her. Until now, she was deceived because she never doubted me. And my lies are all sloppy ones that you'll immediately see through if you just think about it calmly afterwards.

I knew she would find out someday, but it looks like that day has finally arrived. Well, it's a miracle that she didn't notice even for a short period. And... if she knows what kind of person I really am, Yuel will surely spurn me.

I can't look Yuel straight in the eye.

"No, my Master is a respectable one."

However, Yuel's clear voice resounds in my ears. I look at Yuel's face in astonishment. When I do, Yuel gazes fixedly into my eyes and continues.

"Up until now, there were lots of things that I thought were strange. So, so very many of them.

...But I'm sure that unconsciously, I told myself that Master wouldn't tell lies, and tried to believe in you."

So, so very many, huh?

Like what, for example?

That I was silent about the reason Eris threw me out of the hospital?

That I was rubbing Ruruka's breasts and giving her price discounts?

Or else that I kept silent about being able to use the Appraisal skill?

Or wait, maybe that time when I went off to the bathroom and slipped out to watch the beauty contest.

Honestly, I can come up with any number of them.

"But then, I realized.

...That Master really, truly loves big-boobed women, more than anything."

"I-I wish you hadn't realized that."

...Well, I've been together with both Eris and Ruruka a lot lately. And I think I was really ogling them pretty heavily in the bath. On the contrary, there's no way that Yuel wouldn't notice.

"...With that in mind, somehow I was able to understand what Master was always thinking about, and what you wanted to do."

What I was always thinking about, huh? In other words, tits. I get the feeling I'm habitually gazing at tits, and thinking about things like how I should rub

them. This is hopeless. Yuel said that her master is respectable, but how exactly is that respectable?

"Y-Yuel... it's true, I'm that type of person.

...Well, if you hate it, I can release you from being my slave. And I'm sure that someone like Fran would hire you for a high salary at this point."

After this, there's no way that Yuel can love me anymore. If Yuel hates me now, I should respect her will. And the whole reason I kept her by my side as a slave was because she didn't seem to feel the slightest bit of dissatisfaction towards that. Now that my monetary problems have been resolved, there's no need to keep her at my service against her will.

...I would regret it, though.

"I don't hate you, Master. There is no way I could come to hate you.

...Because when I realized that Master was lying, I was very, very happy."

However, Yuel's words are different from what I imagined. She smiles at me as she speaks.

"Certainly, Master was lying to me. But... the lies that Master told me, to keep me from being sad, to stop me from crying, to prevent me from getting hurt... they were all kind lies, I believe."

"...!"

—Kind lies. That wasn't my intention. The fact that I was lying to Yuel, of course it was also for the sake of not making her sad. But if I had to say why I lied, it was to conceal my shortcomings, or to prevent Yuel from finding out the things I wanted to do, those sorts of self-centered reasons.

"Healing my face for me, letting me eat delicious food, letting me sleep in a fluffy bed, and making me incredibly happy... I think I selfishly pushed my own ideals onto Master. But Master avoided shattering those ideals for me. For the sake of a mere slave like me, Master was trying to be a kind, respectable Master."

Apparently that's how Yuel interpreted it. Acting out Yuel's ideals, it sounds nice if you put it that way, but I just enjoyed showing off in front of her.

...There might have been a little of that aspect to it as well, though.

"Master may not be a flawless person. But even so, Master was always being considerate of me, all the time. Whenever you found me about to cry, you always petted my head and comforted me.

...I really love that side of Master. Brave, cool, and kind. That's the Master I am in love with."

...But as for Yuel, it seems like she doesn't care about my faults. It's true that I've been thinking about Yuel a lot. Not wanting to lose Yuel's respect, not wanting to make her sad, covering up every time I do something that's out of character for her master. Trying to carry out the appropriate conduct for Yuel's master has even reshaped my own habitual behavior, countless times.

"I absolutely don't want Master to face any danger. I want to be together with Master no matter what happens."

...Yuel seems grateful towards me, but I feel the same way towards her.

If you say that I've been behaving as Yuel's ideal master for her sake, that also means that I wouldn't have been able to behave like that ideal master if Yuel wasn't there.

If Yuel wasn't there, I wouldn't have been able to repair my relationship with Eris.

If Yuel wasn't there, I wouldn't have even saved the city with Area Heal.

If that never happened, I absolutely never would have been lauded as the Sage like this.

If Yuel wasn't there, by this point I might even have become a minor villain in

those circumstances.

"I am Master's Hero. No matter what happens, I will protect Master without fail... so please, take me with you."

Then Yuel repeats it again.

...Thinking it over, I understand clearly. It seems that for me, Yuel really is a precious existence. Yuel told me she always wants us to be together, but I feel the same way now. That's why I'll answer her like this.

"I understand. With Yuel protecting me, I can safely fight even the evil god.

...Let's go together, Yuel."

"...Y-Yes! As Master's Hero, I will definitely protect you! Whatever happens, I won't let a single attack get through, just watch!"

Once I answer, Yuel's expression brightens in a flash. She seems really happy about being able to go together. With this much enthusiasm, she's practically hopping up and down. It's incredibly cute.

"As expected of Yuel. You're so reliable."

Just like that, I rub her head all over. With one hand— my left hand, I hug Yuel's head close to me, continuing to pet her.

"Ehehe..."

Whether she's happy over getting to go with me or getting petted, Yuel's voice leaks out a little.

—And, unaware of my "lie", Yuel delightedly nuzzles her head against me.

Yuel was saying she noticed my lies, but with this mood, she probably hasn't noticed all of them. To the extent that she realized a few of the lies I've told, I bet she still hasn't realized half of them? Well, I think she'll come to notice them naturally when she becomes an adult. And my lies are all sloppy ones that you'll immediately see through if you just think about it calmly afterwards.

—As I'm hugging Yuel with my left hand like that, I insert my right hand into my item box.

Then I take out the sleeping powder. The fast-acting sleep medication I received from Astel, which supposedly has few side-effects. And, I sprinkle it over Yuel's head.

Immediately, I cast Dis-Poison on myself alone.

It seemed useful so I insisted on asking for some... but it really is useful, this medicine. Even the agile, vigilant Yuel is completely shut down with this. Although I never imagined that Yuel would be the first one I'd use this on.

Perhaps noticing the odd smell, Yuel stares at me, then at the small bottle in my hand. She makes a surprised expression, but only for a moment. The strength quickly drains from Yuel's body, and she falls against me.

"I-I will... pro... Mas..."

Trying to resist her sleepiness, Yuel tries to tell me something. But in the end, this isn't something she can do anything about through willpower.

...Yuel slowly closes her eyes, and starts making gentle sleeping breaths.

"Sorry, Yuel.

...I love you too."

Of course I don't mean that in a romantic way, though. I mean like, y'know, a family member.

I tentatively try stretching Yuel's cheeks, but there's not a single reaction from her. Looks like this time for sure, she's asleep. I softly transport the sleeping Yuel onto the bed.

—Yuel was telling me that “precisely because you're my beloved Master, I don't want you to face any danger”. But the same goes for me. Precisely because she adores me so much, I absolutely cannot subject Yuel to this danger.

I'm definitely going to make this strategy succeed. And when I return, that's when I'll look after Yuel with all my energy.

Having decided that, I step out of the room.

Chapter 78: Strategy

Hiding out of eyesight, I start to make my way outside. According to the knight, the evil god is apparently two days away. Assuming they're most likely keeping pace with the monsters the succubus is bringing along, that amount of distance should take me a single day on horseback.

In any case, I need to secure a means of transport first. Let's borrow a horse from somewhere. I've never ridden one before, but if it's just riding, I'm sure I can manage somehow.

"Whoops...!"

As I'm walking through the mansion and mulling it over, a knight passes right by in the hallway in front of me.

...It's not like I can't come up with a suitable excuse if I'm spotted, but I want to avoid trouble as much as possible. And I'm on the first floor now, so maybe it'll be harder to spot me if I leave the mansion.

-I open a window and go outside. And I come out in the garden. Relying on the light escaping from the windows, I walk towards the mansion's gate.

"Can't see at all this late at night, huh... well, I think I can manage to get out, at least..."

On the way, I feel the sensation of something hitting my head. From the feel of it, it was probably a drop of water or something. I wonder if it's going to start raining? ...As long as it's not bird crap.

"...Sheesh, what now..."

I touch my head.

...It's kinda sticky. What is this?

To determine the origin, I look up.

-There's a dragon head there.

"W-Whooaaah!?"

...I completely forgot. Oh yeah, Ruruka's Earth Dragon was here in the courtyard. And it's late at night, so since it was huddled next to the trees, I didn't notice it at all.

"Guru..."

The dragon looks at me and growls. Man... seeing it again like this, this dragon is scary after all. It's huge, it has fangs and claws, and it can emit that breath.

I really can't understand Ruruka's sensibilities, calling this cute. I wonder if her "cuuute!" was referring to herself or something? It did seem like she really adores this thing, though.

"Listen, don't move, okay? I'm a little busy right now. I don't have time to worry about you."

It looks scary, but dragons can supposedly understand human speech. I hold my hand straight out, conveying a 'stop' intent, while slowly backing away.

—That instant.

The dragon tries to bite my outstretched hand.

"Hey, wai...!!"

I panic and fall right down on my ass. The dragon's face steadily comes nearer.

Now the dragon is close enough that I can feel its breath hitting my face. Ah, this is hopeless. Before I fight the evil god, I'll be killed by Ruruka's pet. Just how meticulously is she caring for it? The dragon's faintly minty breath brushes along my cheek.

And then— it licks me. After that, the dragon starts to rock its head a little, trying to nuzzle against my roughed-up face.

"...Nn...?"

Well this is different.

...It's kinda like it's super attached to me. Why is that?

...By some chance, I wonder if the dragon remembers that I ordered Yuel to save it? If that's the case, it's got a rather strong sense of duty. Even though

that was quite a while ago. If Yuel-san herself came, I wonder how it would express its affection?

...That's it. I was searching for a horse, but maybe I don't need to look any further. And this thing is way faster than a horse.

"...Hey, I'd kinda like you to give me a ride somewhere... would you do that for me?"

I query the dragon. When I do, the dragon makes a little growl in affirmation.

Strong winds are hitting my face. Thanks to the saddle that Ruruka attached, the dragon is an unexpectedly comfy ride. So much so that I only need to hold on with one hand.

If I let Yuel ride it next time, she'll probably be thrilled.

With me riding on the dragon's back, we fly dozens of meters in the sky for just under half a day. Finally, I spot a black cluster in the direction of the royal capital.

Most likely, that's the succubus' monster army.

...Unlike the ones around Merhatz, there are some considerably strong-looking monsters mixed in. And the evil god who uses large-scale magic should also be in there somewhere.

"This is close enough."

The dragon lowers its altitude and I get off. When I do, the dragon flies off as if running away. I know why it's running away. I can't really blame the dragon for it either.

Just like that, I head towards the horde of monsters, walking slowly. Most likely, they already noticed my presence from far off.

...If I'm attacked here, one strike and I'm out. I retrieve a certain something from my item box. After that, I wave it around exaggeratedly, making it highly visible.

—As I do, from within the mass of monsters, I notice one of them fly up into

the sky and come towards me.

Most likely, it's the succubus. Once she gets within several meters of me, she calls out.

"So you really came alone. Not to mention, a white flag? ...You don't feel like fighting?"

...That's right, what I'm holding in my hand is an improvised white flag. Emphasizing my lack of fighting spirit, I shorten the distance between myself and the succubus.

"Yeah, I don't feel like fighting you guys one bit."

"What... don't tell me you were driven out? Since Evil God-sama took the royal capital hostage? ...We were only expecting something like that to cause some internal discord for a while, though."

"No, it's not like I was kicked out. I read the records concerning the war with the evil god, and I concluded that there was absolutely no chance of winning even with the knights fighting. I came here to become an apostle of the evil god. Also, while we're at it, I want to create that harem you mentioned before. I wanna build the greatest harem, and pick the most beautiful women from all around the world."

The succubus shows no particular sign of attacking. She likely already knows that I myself have no fighting ability. Perhaps curious about my reason for coming here alone, she's maintaining a steady distance a few meters ahead of me as she converses with me. There's no sign of large-scale attack magic flying this way, either.

...Does that mean the first phase of my strategy has broken through? If he had launched large-scale attack magic the moment he detected my presence, it would have ended with me unable to do a thing.

I was confident that I wouldn't be attacked, though. I estimated that there was a 60-70% chance that it would be fine.

"I-Is that so. Well, Evil God-sama's resurrection isn't complete, either. For the sake of achieving Evil God-sama's supremacy, you could prove useful from now on. I'll go consult with Evil God-sama. Wait a while."

The succubus makes a bit of a disgusted face at my words and says that. After that, she flies off towards the horde of monsters.

...Man, it's just as I suspected, huh? The evil god's resurrection is apparently incomplete.

I figured that was probably the case, though. For the evil god to use large-scale destruction magic, naturally he must have an enormous enough mana capacity to use large-scale magic. In order to revive said evil god, it shouldn't have been possible to find a priest anywhere who would serve as an adequate vessel. Thinking about how to truly revive the evil god completely, about the only way would be to use me as the vessel.

"Could that possibly be the evil god?"

Even while the succubus was talking to me, the swarm of monsters continued marching this way. I try straining my eyes, and I notice a small humanoid silhouette riding on top of a giant troll. A black-clothed, black-haired... man. The succubus is buzzing around that man, seemingly discussing something with him.

I wonder if that man is the evil god? He looks human-like from this far off, though.

The succubus keeps gesticulating; it seems like she's trying to convince him of something. Most likely, persuading him that he should want to make me their ally or something.

Knowing the succubus, I figured she would be receptive towards me joining their camp. For the evil god faction, even if they destroy this country, the world is still packed with other nations of mankind. Though he may be the evil god, if his resurrection is incomplete, a massive alliance between the nations of mankind could end up giving him a hard fight.

—And that's where I come in.

My ability has extremely high affinity with the succubus, and she can control me freely. Plus she's already aware of my heartfelt desire to create a harem, so she should want to win me over as an ally by all means.

That's right, succubus, persuade him. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that my strategy depends entirely on you.

—A few minutes pass like that, then the succubus comes near me once again.

"Evil God-sama has agreed to make you an apostle. I'll take you over to him."

As the succubus talks, her eyes glow red. Then she mutters with a sneer.

"Well of course. It's not like he believed you.

...You'll join us, but deprived of your reason."

"Guh..."

...Looks like tricking her won't be so simple. Like the last time, I stagger up to the succubus.

"Huhu..."

Seeing that, the succubus lets out a laugh. She must be delighted that I'm giving such a fitting reaction to her ability. I'm about the only one who'd succumb directly to this ability, after all.

"How's that, should I give you the kiss of obedience too? You're about the only man I can tempt right now. I'm in a bit of a good mood, so it's not like I wouldn't do it? Once you know the taste of succubus saliva, you'll absolutely never be able to betray me."

Getting carried away by the mood, the succubus purses her lips with a "mmmm" and shakes her hips in midair. She must think that I can't do a thing now that I'm being manipulated. She's being totally careless.

"Yeah, I would love that."

Since the succubus is inviting me, I reach my hands out towards her. There's not even a meter between us anymore.

"Hm...? There's blood coming from your mouth...?"

The succubus remarks when she looks at my mouth.

Looks like you noticed my abnormality. But even if you notice now, it's too late. At this distance, I can grab you.

—I take out a certain something from my item box. It's the one from the church, which originally belonged to the archbishop. This magic tool, the ornate one that Yuel presented to me.

I've been questioning it this whole time. The archbishop was trying to revive the succubus. That was in order to create his wonderful world where he can do dirty things to girls. But for that, he would naturally need some means of controlling the succubus. How exactly was the archbishop going to try to control her?

And the answer was— this collar.

At the time, I thought the succubus was going to be petrified anyway, so I wasn't expecting to get to use this. But now, in this situation, this collar will be my strongest trump card. This is no mere monster-manipulating collar.

—It's a highest-grade "Subordination Collar", which can control even an apostle of the evil god at will.

"That'd be 'cause I was biting the inside of my cheek to resist, of course."

I attach that collar to the succubus without hesitation. She was careless. Since I was easily manipulated before, I could be easily manipulated this time as well? Such negligence is fatal.

—I was biting the inside of my cheek, enduring the temptation via the pain.

"W-What the...!?"

...Also, I don't intend to tell the succubus this, but on the way here, I was using Slime Jelly while riding on the dragon.

I'm currently in "sage mode". I'm most likely the only one in human history who's joined the Mile High Club with Slime Jelly. The dragon was moaning in utter disgust and squirming, but well, that was for the sake of humanity too. The dragon fled to the skies the instant I dismounted, but I hope it will find it in its heart to forgive me.

Although I bet Ruruka would be pissed if she found out. But Ruruka, your dragon was a comfy ride.

"T-This is... a collar!? Guh...!"

The succubus is surprised at having the collar suddenly put on her. And she instantly tries to take it off. I empower my voice with mana and order her.

"Do not remove the collar."

"Wh-, m-my hands, my hands won't move...!?"

The collar glows red, and the succubus' movement stops. Success.

...But it's kinda like a slave crest, huh. Perhaps they use a similar mechanism.

—Now then, having come this far, there's only one thing left to do.

"Hey, succubus, that thing you told me? It left a huge impression on me, so I still remember it even now."

"W-What did I...?"

"That if you and I joined hands, we could even conquer the world. You said that, succubus.

...Well then, the power of the evil god who once set out to conquer the world, and our combined power which could possibly conquer the world. Starting now, why don't we test which one is stronger?"

The succubus' face twitches. She quickly turns around and tries to tell the evil god something. But it's too late.

—If I lead a massive army towards the evil god from the front, we'll be blown up by his large-scale magic before we get close.

—Even if I lead a small unit on a surprise attack, we'll be cut down by his overwhelming sword technique.

As far as I can tell from his description in the Bible, the evil god seemingly has no openings. But there's a way out of this conundrum.

If I can't lead an army to attack him from the front.

If a surprise attack with a select few will end in my demise.

—Then why don't I

lead a surprise attack with the horde that's already surrounding the evil god?

I give the order.

"Manipulate the monsters, succubus! Strike down the evil god along with me!!"

Simultaneously, the troll suddenly goes berserk. The evil god is immediately thrown off the troll's shoulder, falling amidst the swarm of monsters. And, at the spot where he lands, I can see the surrounding monsters vigorously begin their assault.

Chapter 79: Evil God

"E-Evil God-samaaa, Evil God-samaaaaa...!! H-How could, how could this...!"

She completely fell for it.

Feign surrender, deceive the succubus, and subdue her as my slave. Then make a surprise attack against the evil god using the succubus' monsters. This right here is the solution I came up with to subjugate the evil god. As for the evil god, he shouldn't be able to endure when he's in the center of that horde of monsters.

It's an exceedingly cowardly fighting method that I really wouldn't want Yuel to see, but my opponent is who he is. I'll stop at nothing and hit him with everything I've got.

"Succubus! Don't let up the attacks from the monsters! Make sure that the evil god is killed by them!!"

"Kuh... kuuuuuh...! This thing, when did you...! Since when was there a magic tool that could dominate an apostle...!"

As I thought, the key to this strategy's success was this collar. This magic tool didn't exist within the pages of the Bible. It's an entirely new magic tool, recently developed by the archbishop. I'm sure that neither the evil god nor the succubus herself had ever imagined that her control could be stolen by such means.

...But the evil god is quite tenacious as well. For a moment I thought he'd be instantly crushed to death, but he stubbornly persists, kablamming the surrounding monsters with large-scale magic. Being able to survive against that many monsters at point-blank range, I guess that stuff about him being a sword master wasn't a lie after all.

"Area Heal! Area Heal! Area Heal!!!"

...But, perhaps to avoid hitting himself, he isn't able to blow away all of the monsters at once. As I suspected, it seems like if you can get this close, the advantage of his large-scale magic can be drastically reduced after all.

Besides, unlike humans, there are many sturdy monsters. My healing magic wouldn't make it in time for humans, but as for the large monsters that don't die in a single hit, I can heal them back up right away.

Even if the number of monsters on the outer circumference seem to be decreasing, with my healing magic, the pressure on the evil god won't let up very soon. At this rate, no matter how excellent the evil god's sword technique is, he should go down in time.

"It's working... it's gonna work...!"

...Since I need to stay in range for healing magic, I can't get too far away either. To be honest, I want to use the succubus to watch the progress from the sky, but if the evil god gets me in his sights there's a chance that I could get sniped. All I can do is focus on providing support from the rear with my view obstructed by monsters. Frankly, I'm half-expecting to get swallowed up by an explosion at any second.

—For a few minutes, explosions and healing magic blend together.

"The explosions stopped...? N-No way, Evil God-samaaa...!"

Then, the explosions finally stop. The explosions were my proof that the evil god still lives, resisting the monsters. The fact that they stopped means...

"I did it...?"

For a moment, I feel assured of victory.

—However, that confidence immediately crumbles.

A beam of red light. I see it shining through from the center of the monster horde.

In the blink of an eye, that single beam of light increases to an enormous number of them. The next moment, the monster swarm vanishes into the light, accompanied by a thunderous roar. A gigantic fireball rises up, as if to swallow up the horde of hundreds and thousands of monsters surrounding the evil god in its entirety.

"W-Wh-oaaaahhh!!!"

"H-Higiii!!"

At the same time, the blast hits me and the succubus. Unable to maintain my footing on the ground, I'm blown back, knocked against the ground numerous times.

A hot wind scorches my throat. My eyesight grows hazy. I can't hear a thing over the buzzing in my ears.

In that manner, I tumble along the ground.

"O-Ouch..."

Perhaps because I reflexively used healing magic on myself, I somehow survive. I check the succubus as well... but it's no good. She's collapsed on the ground, making no signs of movement. She doesn't appear to be dead, but it seems like she fainted.

"Well, even if I use the succubus, there's no point if it's gonna be like this, huh?"

When I shift my gaze in the direction of the explosion, I see a slightly large crater. I could've sworn that a huge meteor just crashed down, that's how super powerful it was.

The monster swarm... with power like this, it was most likely annihilated.

"But in that case..."

The evil god himself shouldn't have come out unscathed. Rather, I'd be surprised if he didn't die.

...By some chance, did he blow himself up? He hated the idea of being killed and chose to die by his own hands, or something? He didn't want to be sealed away for a long time again or something?

No, thinking about it won't change anything, will it? In order to confirm the evil god's death, I walk through the thick swirls of dust, towards the center of the explosion.

But, out of the center of that explosion,

"Wha...!? How...!?"

with a relaxed demeanor, a man comes walking towards me. That same man

who was riding on the troll's shoulder. What's more, there's no sign that he was injured by that fireball just now. He's completely unharmed.

"To think that I would have to get serious in a place like this. I ended up having to cancel the barrier magic on the royal capital... couldn't this turn into a pincer attack now?"

The man mutters. Oh yeah... barrier magic. I completely forgot that existed. That magic he was imprisoning the royal capital with, he might have used it on himself.

...But it was written in the Bible that preparations are necessary for it. He shouldn't have had that kind of time.

"Wait, don't tell me...!?"

It's not like there's no possibility. If preparations are necessary, that means he just needs to make preparations.

...While the evil god was fighting that horde of monsters from all sides, while he was blasting away the distant monsters, he prepared the barrier magic.

—Then he set up a barrier around only himself, and immolated the monsters in their entirety.

I wonder if that's what it means? ...What frightening skill. I guess that's why he's called the evil god.

"That troll was a comfy ride, so I was quite fond of it. Such a shame."

As he's walking up to me, the evil god calls out to me. His expression is extremely composed.

...Now that the monsters are gone, I no longer have a road to victory. I may already be a carp on a cutting board.

Even if I run, I'll be attacked from behind with magic. I could stand and face him, but I'll clearly be cut down in a single stroke. It's not like reinforcements are coming, either. And even if they did come, it'd just end with them getting

mowed down by the evil god's magic.

...I guess this is checkmate.

"...Looks like it's my loss, huh."

"You didn't do half bad.

...Well, compared to the previous Sage, your endgame was weak."

The evil god draws his sword. At this distance, a sword is likely faster than magic. As if to show off his drawn sword, the evil god comes closer. It looks like I'm gonna be killed at this rate.

...I grasp the cane in my right hand tighter and tighter.

However, the evil god makes a slightly contemplative expression and lowers his sword for some reason. What's going on? He's not gonna ask me for my last words or something, is he?

"Before I kill you, there's something I want to ask. How did you get here?"

However, what comes flying my way is just a simple question.

"I rode in on a dragon, didn't you see it?"

I came here riding on Ruruka's dragon. The evil god should already be aware of that, though.

"No, that's not what I meant. I'm asking you by what means you descended upon this world from Earth's Japan."

"...!?"

From Earth's Japan...? Why are those words coming from the evil god? No, wait, if I think about it carefully... he has similar features. That large-scale magic which would need enormous mana, and his black-haired, human appearance.

"Don't tell me, you're a sage too...?"

The evil god was a sage. I didn't think it was possible, but reconsidering it, something tells me it's actually extremely likely.

"Wrong. Sage is just a label the church came up with on its own. That name doesn't apply to me."

Not a sage, but an otherworlder. In other words, that means we share the same roots? When the evil god sees my surprised reaction, he grins and continues speaking.

"So then, how did you do it?"

"I was stabbed by a slasher in Japan... the moment I thought I had died, for some reason I was here in this labyrinth city. That's it. I don't know why."

The evil god mutters "labyrinth city... I knew it", then looks at me with scornful eyes. Eyes of contempt for an ignorant human.

"...Do you have any idea why labyrinths exist in this world?"

"N-No, I don't know."

Why labyrinths exist in this world, huh?

...I've had this conversation before, with the saint. Although in the end, with no means of ascertaining the truth, she didn't actually know.

"As a favor to a fellow countryman, I'll tell you before I kill you. The labyrinths are tools for god to interfere with this world. The devices that god uses to intervene in this world are at the very bottom of the labyrinths. You were summoned by a labyrinth."

...If I remember right, the saint was saying the same things back in the bath. I was only vaguely paying attention, but apparently it was actually true.

"I've travelled the world. When I previously attempted to conquer it, I also went to other continents besides this one. And there, I read a variety of this world's myths... including ones outside the Church of Medine."

"Outside this continent...!?"

"And when I did, I found that whenever a powerful dictator or a crafty invader appeared, a sage would suddenly show up from a labyrinth city to put a stop to them. No matter which religion I looked at, they all went like that."

...I was convinced. This world is being influenced by god, using the labyrinths as a medium.

...That's why I decided to destroy all of the labyrinths. So that nothing will get in the way of what I'm going to do from now on."

No matter the religion, a sage appears from a labyrinth to overthrow evil? In other words, does that mean there really is a being in this world capable of observing everything that goes on?

...That's a little hard to believe, though.

Man, looks like the evil god's objective was to destroy the labyrinths after all.

...But what the hell does he want to do after he destroys the labyrinths?

"What you're going to do from now on?"

"I obtained offensive magic with this much destructive force. There's only one thing to do, am I right?"

What he's going to do with such immense destructive force. Such a thing, it can't possibly be anything other than destroying stuff.

...Looks like the evil god doesn't plan on talking any more than this. He pokes the ground with his sword, gazing at me.

"H-Hey, can't you overlook me or something? C'mon, as a favor to a fellow countryman?"

I don't wanna die yet. There are still so many things I have left to do. But the evil god makes a sarcastic smile and silently raises his sword overhead.

"...Guess not."

Most likely, this guy is drunk off his own power. I bet he enjoys destruction just for its own sake.

In the Bible, the evil god was depicted annihilating every city along his invasion route in its entirety, people and buildings included. He was also depicted intentionally suppressing the power of his magic, enjoying carving

away at the cities with his magic like he was making sport of them.

For him to acquire offensive magic of that degree, I can't imagine what kind of experience he brought to this world. Nor can I comprehend how he came to think this way.

—But what *is*

clear to me is what I have to do. If I'm defeated here, without a doubt the evil god will head to that labyrinth city where Yuel and the others are waiting. That's why I return the evil god's smile with this:

"Well then, I'm taking you with me."

Chapter 80: Together and Beyond

I have no victory routes left. Nor any paths that lead to my survival.

But... I can take this guy out with me, and force a draw.

The cane I'm grasping in my right hand. While talking to the evil god, I've been storing mana in this cane right up to the critical point. That out-of-control attack magic.

...According to the saint, it had immense destructive power, enough to blow away an entire mountain. With this rampaging mana, maybe I'll be able to vaporize this guy.

"Wha..."

The evil god makes a shocked expression. At this late juncture, he must not have expected me to still have an ace up my sleeve. Perhaps he himself wasn't aware of a technique like this.

Based on the pattern for myself and the previous sages, this guy could probably use attack magic from the beginning. Just like the other sages, I shouldn't be able to produce attack magic in a situation like this. Well, I doubt any religion wrote about something like a sage making attack magic run out of control and blowing himself up in their scriptures. The Church of Medine was concealing it, at least.

—I take the mana that I was boosting to the very limits of my control, and release it.

I feel the same sensation that I felt before, back when I started to lose control during the magic lesson from Fran. My mana rapidly swells as it flows into the cane.

Most likely, once this goes out of control, I will inevitably die. I didn't feel like dying in the least, but now that things are like this, there's no escaping it. There's absolutely no way I can let this guy trample over the labyrinth city.

"Tch...!"

The evil god clicks his tongue and swings down his sword. He most likely felt my mana expanding. But it's useless now. Before his sword splits my head, my magic is going to blow away this entire area. I resolve myself to death from the torrent of rampaging mana.

"...!"

I shut my eyes.

...Is this the part where my life flashes before my eyes? Within the span of a moment, all sorts of thoughts run through my head. About Eris, about Ruruka, about the saint.

...And, about Yuel.

I was supposed to come back. Without making Yuel sad, so that she wouldn't get hurt, I was planning on settling everything myself and coming home to that labyrinth city unharmed.

The evil god has forced me to go down along with him. But when I die here, just what sort of face will Yuel make? Yuel was saying "I will definitely protect you", so if the evil god and I go down together, I'm sure she'll be tormented by that.

...If it's come to this, maybe it would have been better not to acknowledge Yuel as my Hero.

Yuel is still a child. And she's also a dark elf with an extremely long lifespan. I just hope she will forget about me and recover, to live out a fresh life in a world with no evil god.

Thoughts like those are the only ones that end up coming to mind. I can no longer stop the rampaging mana even if I wanted to. And the evil god's sword is fast approaching me.

With my eyes shut, my life as the Sage is going to end like this.

—However.

From my hand that's holding the cane, I feel the sensation of another hand softly touching it. And then, for just an instant, a high-pitched metallic sound rings in my ears.

"...!?"

...The magic doesn't invoke. Furthermore, the evil god's sword doesn't hack me to pieces. What in the world?

—I open my eyes to take a look. When I do, there's an unbelievably beautiful woman right in front of them.

Her height is around 170cm (TN: 5'7") or so? Even from over her clothes, I can tell that the stylish beauty in front of me has a magnificent rack.

Characteristic tanned skin, accented by glossy silver hair. And from within that hair, long ears are poking out.

...It seems like she's a dark elf.

That beauty intercepted the evil god's sword in front of me, and added her hand to my cane. I can sense my mana steadily being drained through my hand.

...Did this hottie stop my mana from going berserk?

But man, she truly is gorgeous. Her huge tits are good, her glossy hair is good, her facial features are good; she hits my strike zone dead in the center. For a moment, I end up forgetting about the evil god and staring at her.

"At last I was able to find out. After that, Master destroyed the evil god along with himself, and... died."

The lovely lady in front of me turns her head around a little, giving me a smile.

"M-Master...?"

By "Master", is she referring to me?

...B-Besides, I died? I'm still alive, though. I wonder what the heck this beauty is talking about.

"The labyrinths certainly may have been a device for god's intervention. But

they were also a magnificent trial from god that will grant a wish to those who pass, even turning back time."

The enchanting dark elf in front of me declares to the evil god.

"Wha...!?"

For a moment the evil god is unable to digest her words; he's looking at the beautiful woman with a dumbfounded face. After that, he soon comes to his senses and shouts.

"Y-You made it to the end...? That labyrinth...? T-The one that even I couldn't complete, you fully traversed it!?"

The evil god bares his hostility towards the bewitching dark elf woman. After that, with no warning, he emits a heat ray from his palm.

—Chantless magic. That heat ray is unmistakably about to pierce through the alluring dark elf woman in front of me.

—I have to protect her, that's the feeling I get. At once, I try to dive in front of the woman to cover for her, but she instantly creates a giant ice pillar in front of her which somehow reflects the heat ray.

"For killing Master back then, I will absolutely never forgive you."

The evil god avoids the reflected heat ray... then, their battle begins.

"Tch!"

Clicking his tongue, the evil god swings his sword. The dark elf easily catches it with her ornate sacred sword.

Every time the evil god swings his sword, the dark elf defends with her sacred sword in one hand and a thick knife in the other. When the evil god fires off chantless arcane magic, the dark elf counters it by casting chantless arcane magic of the opposite element. Riposting with swords and sorcery.

The evil god is terrifyingly skilled, but the dark elf doesn't fall behind in ability either. My eyes can't follow them as they move about the battlefield at breakneck speed. This is too high-level; there's no room for me to step in.

"What should I do...?"

That second, max-level flame magic fired off by the evil god crashes into max-level freezing magic fired off by the dark elf. The shockwave from their collision brushes past my cheeks.

"W-What the hell! What the hell are youuuu! You're not even an otherworlder, how are you getting in my way! What purpose did you even have for coming here!?"

For a moment, the battle stops.

...The evil god is short of breath. By some chance, he might have run out of mana. Well, he did just finish fighting off that many monsters. And his revival was supposedly incomplete, so he may not be able to engage in a drawn-out fight.

"I will absolutely never permit a world where Master dies."

"Don't fuck with me!!"

The evil god makes a terribly irritated expression at the dark elf's reply. After that, he turns in my direction and holds out his palm.

...Ah, this is a dangerous one.

I try to take cover at once, but I'm slightly too late. It's going to be close, but it will pierce me.

—Or so I thought, but that instant.

A giant ice pillar rises up once again in front of me. It reflects the heat ray, and the heat ray gets magnified into an even more enormous heat ray as it bounces back at the evil god. The giant heat ray gouges out the earth as it progresses. Then, the evil god... is engulfed by it.

When the heat ray disappears, there's nothing left. The evil god has vanished without a trace.

...Is it over?

That evil god was done in as easily as twisting a baby's arm. Just who the hell is that dark elf?

No, I can come up with one possibility. However, it's so outlandish that even though I can wrap my head around it intellectually, my heart can't fathom it.

...But that appearance. Plus that attitude, calling me Master. And then there's that familiar-looking sacred sword the dark elf is holding. That sacred sword is the one I promised Yuel that we'd go get from the church next time...

As I'm pondering, the dark elf rushes over to me.

"Masterrr..."

Then, once she's standing in front of me, tears well up in her eyes as if she simply can't hold back.

"I wanted to see you so, so much! For so very long, I've wanted to see you!!"

After that, she breaks down and starts to cry. This crying face. It lines up perfectly with Yuel's face.

"...Could you be, Yuel...?"

"Yes, Master!"

This woman... no, Yuel, said that she made it to the end of the labyrinth. She said that the labyrinth will grant a wish, even turning back time. Plus I'm pretty sure she said that I died here.

...Somehow or other, I get it.

I most likely died here once along with the evil god. But... Yuel couldn't approve of a conclusion where I died.

"Master, I, I tried my best. I wanted to meet you again no matter what; I tried so, so very hard. To complete the labyrinth, to save Master from the evil god, I tried my very best! And finally... at last, I was able to save you."

Yuel comes up and embraces me. Her head touches my shoulder. This height is considerably different from the Yuel I know. This Yuel looks old enough to be called an adult.

"Master... it really is you..."

She touches my face with her hands, staring at me like she's trying to absorb every last detail. In this Yuel's face, happiness, sadness, a sense of

accomplishment... all sorts of expressions are mixed together.

The beauty who just defeated the evil god... was Yuel.

I can't even imagine it... just how much time did she spend studying, to be able to obtain that level of ability? That long, deep labyrinth that nobody has been able to traverse thus far, just how much perseverance did she have in order to get through it?

As I'm looking at Yuel and wondering, she raises her head slightly and gazes into my eyes. Then, in a whisper.

"Master, I worked incredibly hard. You told me, right? That if I worked hard, you'd give me a reward... way back when we used to enter the labyrinth together."

"Y-Yeah, anything is fine. What do you want?"

Did I say that? I don't remember, though. But if there's something she wants, I should give it to her. It seems like she really worked hard and all. It's so sudden that I don't really know how to feel, but this Yuel did save my life from certain death.

And, before I can finish saying "What do you want?", Yuel's face instantly comes closer.

"Master, I love you too!"

And, along with her voice.

—Her tongue enters. That's the first thing I feel.



I'm being kissed. I'm being kissed by Yuel.

"Fmmh... mmmh..."

"M-Mmmph...!?"

As if she's trying to take back something she lost, as if she's full of insatiable desire, Yuel kisses me over and over. While her tits are pressing against me and making me wonder if it wasn't a miracle that they grew out this much from that flat chest, Yuel repeatedly kisses me countless times. Yuel's delighted, contented face is right in front of mine, continually kissing me.

...I'm starting to feel a little strange.

H-Hold on, this is Yuel. Doing such things is definitely wrong.

...N-No, isn't it fine since she's an adult? B-But it's Yuel we're talking about. I start to get a variety of unpleasant feelings. But I wonder why they're unpleasant? There doesn't seem to be anything unappetizing at all about her now that she's become an adult.

And, as I'm feeling conflicted.

"O-Oi, you're kinda... glowing?"

Yuel starts to glow dimly. Moreover, I feel like her outline is becoming somewhat vague, as if she's getting fuzzy.

"A-Are you alright, Yuel!?"

"...I may have never existed now."

When I ask, Yuel gives me that answer.

"You never existed now?"

"I understood that. Because in a future where Master didn't die, the current me... would not exist."

If I don't die anymore, this Yuel won't exist either. And she knew that...? Which basically means that even though Yuel knew she would have to throw away her own existence, she still came to save me...

"Being able to meet Master in the end, I was content. That I can be together with Master for this moment, I am truly, incredibly happy."

The amount of light dancing around Yuel gradually increases. Yuel's outline becomes more and more indistinct.

"...Please give the rest of my reward to my younger self."

"Yuelll...!!"

I hug Yuel tightly. For a moment, I feel the sensation of her touch. However, she soon turns into particles of light and disperses.

...The evil god was easily dispatched by Yuel. Through her all-too-sudden intervention, my life was spared.

But that adult Yuel, I wonder what she was feeling when she was about to come save me. For her to manage to get through the labyrinth, just how hard did she have to work before she was able to accomplish that?

There are so many things I wanted to ask her. Most likely, there were many things we should have discussed as well. But Yuel has already vanished into particles of light. I have no means of confirming it anymore.

How did Yuel feel?

Here on this plain, now that both the evil god and Yuel have departed... that's all I can think about.

Chapter 81: In Another World's Labyrinth City

Ten days have passed since the evil god was defeated. The royal capital was safely liberated, and peace has returned to the world. The saint has continued making progress in her preparations for our marriage, and today at last, the wedding ceremony between me, the saint, Eris, and Ruruka is taking place.

"H-Hey, my dress, don't you think it's a bit flashy? W-Walking through the streets like this will be a little embarrassing..."

"I figure this level is fine, isn't it? Plus we only have to wear them once. It's no big deal."

We're in a room in a certain small church in the labyrinth city. Accordingly, Ruruka and Eris have their wedding dresses on and they're checking each other's outfits.

—There's a special custom in this labyrinth city for wedding ceremonies. Namely, once the wedding is over, they parade through the streets, debuting their marriage to the people within the city.

"Doesn't it suit you, Eris? I think it's fine like that."

Being that it's the Sage's marriage, there will most likely be tons of spectators. Perhaps feeling shy about that, Eris keeps checking her outfit over and over.

"I-Is that so... i-in that case, very well."

"H-Hey, Shiki, what about me? H-How do I look?"

Did she dislike that only Eris got praised? Ruruka asks too, pointing at herself.

"Yeah, of course it suits you."

"Y-You think? E-Ehehe..."

When I say that, Ruruka becomes bashfully pleased. Once the marriage was decided, Eris and Ruruka have been getting along reasonably well, more or less. I daresay this is the Harem End. My dearly desired scene has finally come.

Well, after that day Ruruka somehow found out that I was using Slime Jelly atop the dragon and wouldn't speak to me for a few days. And sure, I tried

making a night visit to Eris before the wedding and she kicked me out of the room and wouldn't speak to me for a few days either.

But it's mostly been tranquil.

"Are all of your preparations in order?"

At which point the saint comes into the waiting room and checks with the two of them. That saint is properly wearing her wedding dress as well.

"I am terribly sorry for being unable to hold a satisfactory rehearsal due to the suddenness. After this, the ceremony with Shiki-sama and the three of us will be held in front of the church. It shall proceed as follows: Shiki-sama will give each of us the prepared rings there, and we will exchange vows. Thereafter, we will march through the streets dressed as-is to make our debut, with the reception being held at Lord-sama's mansion."

—Looks like the ceremony will begin before long.

...But it'll be a problem if she starts it already. It'll be a problem if the ceremony starts before *that* arrives.

In a corner of the room, Yuel is staying out of the conversation entirely, looking somewhat lonesome. I glance over at her.

I've been thinking about it ever since she fought with the evil god and gave up her life. Ever since, I've been thinking about what I should do.

And the *answer* that I came up with as a result should arrive shortly. I special ordered it in the highest quality possible, using up all of the pocket money I had. I begged the merchant that I wanted it delivered by this morning... but I wonder if by some chance, it won't make it in time? I was also told that since it was made-to-order, it would take a while.

—While I'm worrying like that.

"S-Sage-samaaa!!"

A woman practically dives into the waiting room.

"H-Here is the article you requested. As you ordered, the finishing touches were done using the highest-grade mythril. P-Please confirm your receipt..."

"Ohh! So it came!"

While trying to hide it from Eris, Ruruka and the saint, I check the article brought by the woman.

—Yeah, they did a good job. With this, there should be no objections.

"What's the matter, Shiki? What's that?"

Ruruka asks in an inquisitive voice. But there's no way I can answer her question. I put away what I received from the woman in my item box and immediately head for the door.

"Ah, it's no big deal.

...I'm just gonna go outside for a bit. Yuel, come with me as my guard."

"H-Hold on, Shiki, where are you planning to go!?"

Eris raises her voice in surprise. Well, it's right before the wedding ceremony and all. She'd be worried that I might go off somewhere now. But precisely because it's right before the wedding ceremony, specifically because it's now, I have to do this.

The saint might have realized what I'm about to do; she's giving me a somewhat tender look. Even if she realizes it, she understands well not to put it in words. And I'm sure she absolutely won't say anything to Eris or Ruruka.

"It's fine, I'll be right back!"

I give the two of them a suitable excuse, and rush out of the room with Yuel in tow.

Still wearing my wedding ceremony tuxedo, I walk through the church. It's not like I'm heading anywhere in particular. It's just that any place is fine so long as there's nobody's around. Looking out over my surroundings, I proceed through less and less populated areas.

—Then, after walking for about a minute, I come out into the church's garden.

There's no sign of anyone here. This place should be good.

"Yuel."

I call out the name of the girl following behind me.

"Yes, Master."

Yuel replies. The tone of her voice is calm but somewhat lonesome, giving off a slightly resigned feeling.

Yuel stands in front of me, gazing intently at my appearance.

...Her eyes are a little red. By some chance, she might have ended up crying when I wasn't watching. As I suspected, Yuel must feel lonely over being the only one who can't get married.

But I have no intention of making Yuel sad. That's why I gave her these comforting words.

"Yuel, marriage is for once you're an adult, okay."

Even though you can't get married now, you can once you become an adult. I presented those forward-thinking words to Yuel.

"Once... I'm an adult..."

Yuel's expression saddens from those words.

...Well, I knew she would react like this. Yuel has already realized it. The fact that I tell her lies in order to avoid hurting her. The current Yuel won't be deceived by such superficially clever, trifling words.

"Yuel, when you grow up, you'll become an incredibly beautiful woman. So beautiful that you won't lose to Eris or Ruruka, not even to the saint."

"I'll become a beautiful woman?"

...Most likely, Yuel lacks self-confidence. The current Yuel has no breasts, and she's short. She's still completely outside my strike zone, because she's just a kid. Even if I insist that her development will go well, she doesn't necessarily know that she'll grow up according to my ideal.

Because of that, she can't put her faith in my words.

But I have confidence. The current Yuel doesn't know this, but I alone clearly understand her future prospects. And... of how exactly the current Yuel sees

me, perhaps. I have reliable testimony from that time, from the grown-up Yuel herself.

—I've been thinking about it ever since then, seeing that grown-up Yuel as she disappeared into particles of light. About exactly what kind of *reward* I should give the Yuel who went to such extremes for me.

"Yuel, you are a child. So there's no way you can get married yet.

...But I can still give you this."

It's not like I can get married to Yuel when she's still a child. I may have given her a verbal promise about how she's going to look, but she won't believe me.

—So I went to great pains, and worked out an answer.

This is that answer. I decided to establish a proof of that promise. In front of Yuel, I hold out the tiny box I just received.

"M-Master, i-is this... i-is this...?"

Did she guess from looking at the box? Yuel makes an astonished face. I slowly open the lid, making sure that Yuel can clearly see.

—Inside, there's a ring that's much the same as the ones I'm going to give to Eris, Ruruka, and the saint after this.

But this is something that I used up my entire fortune to special order, a one-of-a-kind engagement ring for Yuel alone. Yuel's eyes open wide when she sees the ring. Her cheeks gradually blush, and her gloomy expression brightens like a blooming flower.

"A r-ring... i-is this ring f-for... for me...?"

Yuel looks at me with an expression like she can't believe it. Well, I wouldn't have believed it myself if you told me just a short time ago that I'd be doing something like this. Just what kind of lolicon would give an engagement ring to a kid? I'm sure that's what I would have thought, no doubt about it.

But the current me wants Yuel to have this ring. From the bottom of my heart, that's how I feel.

"Yeah, it's an engagement ring, Yuel. Before the wedding ceremony with everyone, I wanted to give you this."

One more time, I look around.

...A-Alright, nobody's watching. I pick up the ring, and gently place it onto Yuel's finger.

"I-It's incredibly beautiful..."

Yuel takes her hand with the ring on it and holds it up to the sky. The ring catches the sunlight and makes tiny sparkles.

Then I take a deep breath, in order to say what I have to say. Yuel's body quivers with a jolt. I'm sure she understands what I'm planning to say now.

Saying these words requires a suitable amount of courage. When the other party is Yuel, all the more courage is needed, a different sense.

A still-young slave girl. I can still turn back now, that statement crosses my mind. But I won't turn back.

—Why, you ask? Because I'm Yuel's courageous master.

"Yuel, once you become an adult, let's get married."

Yuel's eyes snap open upon my proposal. After that, she squeezes her eyes shut and lowers her head like she's trying to savor it. Then, she looks up at me bashfully for a moment, before jumping towards me with her arms outstretched—

"Yes, Masterrr!"

and in a voice that sounds delighted from the bottom of her heart, she gives me her reply.



Volume 5 LN Side Story: Secret Wedding

We finish the wedding ceremony at the church safely, and prepare to make our debut on the streets.

I'm sitting in a chair in the waiting room, when Eris and Ruruka approach me in their wedding dresses.

"Hey, Shiki, I was wondering about this during the entire wedding ceremony, but that ring that Yuel-chan has been cherishing... she definitely got it from you, right?"

"That must be a wedding ring for Yuel-chan, huh... it's not like I don't understand your feelings, but... but she's still a kid, y'know?"

"...!?"

I break out in a cold sweat at their words.

...They found out.

...It's been exposed instantly.

"H-, h-h-h-h, how did you know...!?"

"Well, you see..."

"...With Yuel fawning over a ring that much, anybody could tell."

I didn't notice since I was nervous about the wedding ceremony, but apparently Yuel has been admiring the ring this whole time.

No, I purposely handed it to her before the ceremony since I didn't want her to be miserable about the wedding, so I guess that's fine.

But I didn't anticipate that Eris and Ruruka would notice.

"I-I'm sorry, Masterrr!"

Yuel, who was waiting nearby, makes a surprised face and apologizes.

She most likely didn't realize that she wasn't supposed to show it off in front of people.

"N-No, it's fine for you to have that, Yuel. Don't worry."

But if I let Yuel worry about these things here, I'll be putting the cart before the horse.

Since I let Yuel have that ring as a reward.

Just in case, I'll pet her head.

"I don't particularly intend to criticize you, either. And I've been feeling worried for Yuel-chan."

"Yeah, she did seem kinda pitiful."

Looks like neither of them plan to criticize me for handing over the ring.

Moreover, it seems they've been concerned for Yuel's sake.

...Well, although we can't get married since she's a kid, anyone can plainly see that Yuel harbors affection for me.

There can't be many people who could watch Yuel's expression steadily become gloomier as the wedding preparations progressed, and not worry about her.

"B-Besides... that isn't a wedding ring. It's an engagement ring."

Wedding rings and engagement rings.

There's a big difference between the two. Though I did give Yuel, a young slave girl, an engagement ring to say "Let's get married once you grow up", it's not like I gave her a ring to say we're married right now while she's still a young girl.

That's where I draw the line, where my ethics absolutely will not yield.

I have to clear up this misunderstanding no matter what.

However, when Eris hears my statement, she looks surprised.

And she suggests this:

"Is that so? ...But, if you intend to go that far, wouldn't it have been better to have a wedding ceremony for Yuel-chan as well?"

A wedding ceremony with Yuel.

...No, wait, that would be quite tough, to say nothing of my standpoint as the Sage.

Besides, isn't it good enough to conduct the ceremony once she grows up? We'll still be engaged and all.

"...M-My own wedding ceremony?"

However, Yuel latches onto those words.

"She's right. If you're gonna have one eventually, why not have it now?"

Moreover, Ruruka even endorses Eris' proposal.

I wonder what's going on?

...Wait, I wasn't really looking at Yuel during the ceremony, but by some chance, she might have been making a bit of a lonely expression.

And Eris and Ruruka both seem concerned for Yuel.

Yuel's face lights up when she receives Ruruka's approval.

...Even if they hadn't said anything, Yuel probably really wanted to have a wedding ceremony too.

However, Yuel seems to realize something, and her expression quickly darkens.

"B-But, I... I don't have a dress. Besides, if we're seen by other people, it will surely cause trouble for Master..."

...That's right.

Therein lies the problem.

I thought it would be fine to have my wedding ceremony with Yuel once she becomes an adult.

Of course, I couldn't deny the possibility that Yuel would be saddened a little, but the reward I gave Yuel was purely in the form of an engagement.

Even if we hastily say "Let's hold a wedding ceremony", she doesn't have a dress prepared, and the room hasn't even been emptied.

If we started it now, today's debut around town and the reception schedule

would end up getting delayed.

"I'm sure it will be fine."

However, Eris kneels down on her knees in front of Yuel and speaks to her tenderly while petting her head.

At the same time the saint, who had gone off somewhere before I noticed, comes into the waiting room.

"...At last, I have ushered the attendees out of the church. As the preparations are in order, shall we start over with Yuel-chan included?"

And as soon as the saint enters the room, she proposes that.

I wondered where she had gone, but apparently she was clearing everyone out of the church.

...And yet we only just got to the topic of doing a wedding ceremony for Yuel a moment ago.

Don't tell me she predicted that things would take a turn this way when she saw my conduct and Yuel's reaction?

...That's the saint for you.

Having dodged her way through the church's schemes, she demonstrates tremendous foresight.

"But... she doesn't have a dress, huh."

Looks like the saint has been working hard, but we're missing something important.

A wedding dress is the centerpiece of the wedding ceremony.

If we end up having a ceremony without that, Yuel won't be very pleased.

And yet, as soon as I say that, the saint takes something white out of her item box.

"Waaaaah...!"

When Yuel sees it, she raises a delighted voice.

In the saint's hands is a pure white wedding dress.

A dress rivaling the ones that Eris, Ruruka and the saint are currently wearing, and beautifully adorned. What's more, the size is just right for Yuel.

Then, the saint smiles as she speaks to me.

"When Shiki-sama slipped out of the room before the ceremony, I ordered my subordinate to have this made with all haste. I roughly understood that it would end up this way."

She's way too perceptive.

With only Eris, Ruruka, and the saint in attendance, we enter the church's place of worship.

Yuel and I stand before the priest.

"The two of you, exchange rings."

"Yes."

"Y-Yeah."

Yuel bashfully carries out every little step of the Medine doctrine's procedures in delight.

Even though my movements are still clumsy despite this already being my second time, Yuel's are perfect.

Most likely, she paid close attention to Eris and Ruruka's movements and scorched them into her memory.

Meanwhile, I'm so tense I can hardly even remember how it went.

Then, once the priest makes sure that Yuel and I exchange rings, he proceeds to the next step.

"...Very well, do you vow here to join your two hearts as one, to support each other with constant mutual respect, in times of joy, in times of sickness, from this day forward unto eternity, and form a happy family?"

"Yes, I vow it."

"Yeah, I vow."

Oh right, after the ring exchange comes the vows.

I'm pretty sure I did this part with Eris and the others too.

To make sure it goes smoothly, I try to dig up my memories from within all the tension.

—And then I remember something.

...After this... there's another ritual we have to carry out.

No, with Eris, Ruruka, and the saint, it was fine.

But when it's with Yuel, the ritual that should be coming up next will be extraordinarily problematic.

Oh no.

That is extremely bad.

...However, the priest makes the pronouncement indifferently.

"And now, to seal the vows with a kiss."

"K-Kissss!? H-Hey, that's... "

"...You have properly carried it out with everyone else, have you not? This is a mandatory, sacrosanct tradition for a wedding in the Church of Medine."

Filling the role of the priest is a bishop invited from Crusell, who's famous for his sincere and rigid personality. He's an acquaintance of the saint, and supposedly extremely tight-lipped.

...Looks like his personality is strict when it comes to the Church of Medine's doctrine as well.

When I let out a surprised voice, the priest's expression sharpens a little.

This wedding ceremony ritual is a traditional rite shared by all Medine believers.

I guess that even the Sage won't be permitted to violate it.

"N-No, but still..."

Certainly, I did get engaged to Yuel, but that doesn't mean I was planning to go so far as kissing her.

I had no intention to do such things with the still-young Yuel in the first place.

T-That's why I stopped at getting engaged.

Look, before Yuel's mind and body are both properly mature, there are a number of problems with physical contact.

However, the saint interjects.

"Shiki-sama, worry not. It is merely a formality."

Don't friggin' talk to me like you're a relative handing a sake cup to a child.

But it's most likely exactly as the saint says, a ritual kiss is no problem, that's just the values of this world.

And neither Eris nor Ruruka are particularly objecting.

...Yuel already has her eyes closed, tilting her chin up.

This is a wedding ceremony.

For Yuel, it's her important wedding ceremony.

How could I possibly make Yuel cry by refusing to kiss her?

I-I guess I can only go through with it?

But is it really okay?

I feel like it's not alright.

Really not alright.

Should I use "Once you're an adult, okay"?

N-No, that's all I've been using lately.

Besides, it's not relevant for getting through this.

I-It's hopeless.

I can't come up with any replacement scheme for kissing Yuel.

My gaze falls upon Yuel's lips.

"Master..."

Her lips part slightly, inviting me.

Isn't there anything I can do other than resolving myself to it?

No, I should keep racking my brain until the last second.

Think, what's the best solution to break out of this situation...!

But I can't come up with anything.

The time limit is fast approaching, moment by moment.

Kuh... w-what... what the heck do I do!?



Side Story: Yuel GO 1

"Shiki, w-w-w-w-what do I do! Dra-chan, Dra-chan gave biiirth!"

One morning, in a room at the lord's mansion, Ruruka bursts in and announces that.

"Gave birth... it had a baby?"

"Y-Yeah. She's a dragon though so it was an egg, y'know? ...I never realized it this whole time, but Dra-chan's apparently been pregnant for a while, and I just found her egg in the courtyard!"

I never knew that dragon was actually pregnant. I mean, I didn't know it was actually a female in the first place. Earlier, I ended up using Slime Jelly while I was riding that dragon, though.

...Now I get why it disliked that so much.

"Hey, Shiki help me! I-I can't do anything about it myself! Hey, Shiki, c'mon!"

Ruruka seems to be quite stressed out over this whole dragon birth situation; she's practically begging me in tears. But I don't feel like there's much I can do to help anymore if it's already given birth.

"Hold on, Ruruka, calm down. It's the dragon's egg, so won't the dragon take care of it? It would be one thing if it were about to give birth, but if the egg has already been laid, what's all the fuss about?"

If it were a selectively bred livestock animal that would be another matter, but I can't imagine that dragons would normally have any trouble raising their young without human assistance. It's not like I don't understand her getting worked up about her pet laying an egg, but no matter how I look at it, she's too panicky.

As I'm having those thoughts, Ruruka retorts.

"That's wrong! Y'see, dragons have this trait where a strong male incubates the eggs! So the female Dra-chan will just stare strangely at the egg, see, and she won't keep it warm even when I tell her to!"

"What's with that trait."

"...See, dragon eggs are supposedly reaaaaally really yummy, so lots of monsters target their eggs. That's why they absolutely need a strong male to protect the egg and keep it warm."

"Really really yummy, huh?"

Then let's try it sunny-side up. Those words nearly leave my mouth for a moment, but that dragon is Ruruka's pet. If I told her something like that, it wouldn't end in just disdain. And Yuel is also looking in my direction, as if she's interested in the dragon egg too.

...Oh well.

"Then for starters, why don't we go see just how it's doing?"

The courtyard of the lord's mansion. When we head to the location, there certainly is an egg there. It's lying on its own near the pile of straw that the dragon uses for a bed.

...And the dragon in question is just gazing at the egg, not attempting to incubate it.

Looks like what Ruruka said was true. Although dragons can understand language, in the end monsters will be monsters. I guess nothing can be done about its innate traits and instincts.

"It's probably impossible to bring over a male dragon or something at this point, huh."

Dragons are extremely unusual monsters. I've heard that they don't settle down unless they become emotionally attached to people, so bringing a male dragon here at this point would be difficult.

"This egg is all alone, isn't it..."

Yuel mutters wistfully when she sees the dragon not attempting to keep the egg warm.

"If it doesn't stay warm it won't incubate, and if it's left unincubated long enough, the egg will die..."

A fretful look runs across Ruruka's face as well. Then Ruruka turns back to me once again, and squeezes my hands as she speaks.

"But y'know, I checked the books on dragons! And if it's a male human the dragon is comfortable with, a man, the dragon will trust him with her egg!"

...Now I get it. So that's why she called me.

After the Slime Jelly incident, the dragon forgave me once I properly explained the situation and apologized. Even if I approach it, it won't roar or snap at me. This dragon may have a scary face, but it's smart. It's a good kiddo.

"Does it have to be me?"

"C'mon, it's no good if Dra-chan isn't emotionally attached..."

I get what Ruruka is saying.

...But, though the dragon doesn't seem to hate me, I get the feeling that if you ask whether or not it's attached to me, it's complicated. A bit earlier, when I tried to pet it with my right hand, it flinched and jumped back. I could pet it with my left hand, but it absolutely won't let me touch it with my right hand, the one that was holding the Slime Jelly back then.

Most likely, rationally it likes me but physiologically it's impossible, that's what I am to the dragon. By some chance, I might have ended up inflicting some trauma on it.

"I think... that's probably not going to work?"

"But, c'mon, Dra-chan won't let girls touch it! Please! You're the only one I can ask for something like this, Shiki! ...It apparently takes three weeks for it to hatch, though."

"No, I'm telling you, that's not the problem... wait, isn't three weeks too long...?"

When I show her a slight intent to refuse, Ruruka tries to entreat me again.

But touching the dragon's egg is probably impossible for me. Moreover, asking me to keep it warm for three weeks is way too unreasonable.

"C'mon, Shiki, please! I'm begging you!"

And yet it doesn't seem like Ruruka will give up. Through her expression, through her voice, her desperate feelings are coming across.

...Oh well. I think it's probably impossible, but I guess I'll try touching the dragon egg. Although if it growls or tries to bite me, I'm done.

Then, when I turn my gaze to the egg.

"It's warm... so this is a dragon's egg..."

—Yuel is touching it. Patting the egg all over with great interest.

And the dragon is making a continuous, pleased hum while watching her for some reason.

...? Yuel, a female, is touching the egg?

"The dragon isn't bothered by Yuel touching the egg?"

"...? She hasn't particularly done anything."

What does that mean...?

—Dragon eggs are raised by "a strong male". According to Ruruka, there's no problem even if that male is a human, but Yuel is without a doubt a girl. And yet Yuel is able to touch the egg.

"Even though it won't let Ruruka, why is it fine with Yuel...?"

Then, when I compare Yuel and Ruruka visually, I realize. The difference that exists between Yuel and Ruruka.

It's... boobs.

The size of their boobs is completely different.

"Don't tell me..."

...Perhaps the point that dragons use to differentiate between human males and females is the shape of their bodies. And Yuel, how do I put this... has no curves. From her head to her feet, it's a straight line. And since the body structures of reptiles and humans are so different, they probably aren't able to make minute facial distinctions.

From the dragon's perspective, I wouldn't be surprised if it couldn't make the

distinction between male and female with her.

Besides, her strength is certified. Yuel-san is the one who released this dragon from the evil god adherents' collar, after all.

And, completely unaware of what's running through my head,

"Master, Ruruka-san, this egg has to be kept warm, right? ...Would it be okay for me to do it?"

Yuel timidly suggests that.

–It seems that once female dragons entrust their eggs to a male, they hold little interest afterwards. When Yuel said "I want to wrap the egg in a towel to keep it warm" and went to take it into the lord's mansion, the dragon didn't try to stop her.

Now that Yuel has brought the egg into our room, she starts by rolling a towel around it. Next, she takes out a type of cloth satchel that hangs from the shoulders and puts the egg inside. After that, she hangs the bag around her neck and ties it to herself.

"This way I can keep it warm."

Then, sitting in a chair, Yuel wraps both arms around the egg in front of her belly to warm it. Like a pregnant woman. With that sort of affectionate expression, Yuel tenderly rubs the egg as she warms it.

...Perhaps Yuel even empathizes with that egg, abandoned by its parents.

"It's a bit awkward, but you can hang on to it all the time that way, huh. You know it'll take three weeks to hatch, right?"

"Yes!"

Yuel answers enthusiastically. Carrying an egg for three weeks sounds really tough, but Yuel seems motivated.

"But doesn't it look weird?"

Ruruka murmurs when she sees Yuel's appearance.

...Well, it's not like I don't see her point. In order to keep the egg against her

body, Yuel has a string wrapped around herself and the bag containing the egg. From a fashion perspective, it's certainly hideous.

"It looks weird?"

"It'd be cuter if you covered it up with another layer of clothing! I'll go ask a maid!"

And with that assertion, Ruruka leaves the room.

One hour later. What Ruruka asked the maid for were some baggy clothes that Yuel could wear. And Yuel is now putting them on. Apparently the maid sewed them especially for her.

"They're incredibly comfortable and easy to wear."

But, this... this could be awkward.

"Now the bag and the egg are completely hidden!"

Certainly, everything is hidden. Thus far it was "a young girl with a large spherical object attached to the front of her stomach", but now it's become "a young girl whose stomach is unnaturally big".

Yuel's current outward appearance could be expressed in a few brief words.

A pregnant young girl dressed in maternity wear.

Moreover, Yuel herself is rubbing her belly with a loving expression. What she's actually rubbing is a dragon egg, but from an outside perspective, you can only see it as an expectant woman rubbing her pregnant belly.

"O-Oh man, hey..."

Yuel is always together with me. Even though she needs to keep the egg warm, that most likely won't change.

...But just imagine it. If I walk around the mansion or through the streets with a young girl in this condition waiting upon me, how exactly will her relationship with the man next to her, whom she calls "Master", be viewed?

Yuel, with her unnaturally swollen belly, looks at me and says-

"Master, does it suit me?"

Her expression seems utterly delighted.

...I don't know which maid created it, but the maternity wear that Yuel is currently sporting was made just for her. She must be happy that someone made an outfit specifically for her to wear.

"Y-Yeah... looks great on you..."

I can't say it. There's no way I can tell her anything like it looks unnatural or it doesn't suit her.

...But it shouldn't be necessary for me to veto Yuel's outfit.

I'm not the one who suggested these clothes and went to go get them. The one who brought them ought to properly point out the unacceptable part. I give Ruruka a grimacing look.

When I do, Ruruka looks around Yuel's belly and makes a subtle face, then looks back up at Yuel's joyous expression and holds her hands to her head. Seems like Ruruka has also precisely grasped the issue with the current situation.

C'mon, Ruruka, say it. The "it's unfitting" has to properly come from your own lips, Ruruka. That's your responsibility as the one who brought these clothes. I continue applying pressure to Ruruka with my gaze.

And then Ruruka... abruptly averts her eyes from me.

"Y-Yep! I-It suits you! Alright, Yuel-san, Shiki, supposedly it's good to rock it every now and then while warming it, so with that, I leave the rest to you!"

Ruruka runs off at the mouth for a while, then runs off out of the room entirely.

"..."

Looks like Ruruka just pushed everything onto me.

...Why don't I just smash that dragon's egg? But no, Yuel would cry, so I can't.

"Until this child hatches, I will do my best in this outfit!"

You plan to keep up that appearance for the full three weeks, Yuel-san? But with Yuel warming the egg this fondly, in the end there's no way I can tell her

it's unacceptable.

"Having a baby be born is fun."

Yuel remarks, rubbing her belly.

...But please, properly attach the "dragon" to it.

Side Story: Yuel GO 2

After Ruruka ran out of the room, I've been thinking as I watch Yuel lovingly rub her bulging belly.

What the hell can I do to resolve this maternity situation that Yuel-san is in?

Perhaps because I told her it looks good on her, Yuel keeps picking up the hem of her baggy outfit to admire it, and she gets all bashful whenever we meet eyes. That expression looks like the words "utterly content" are written across her face. I can't possibly tell her at this late hour to take off her maternity wear.

...But, nevertheless, I can't afford to leave Yuel looking like this. Pretty much everyone living in this mansion knows that Yuel and I have a master and slave relationship. In light of that, now that Yuel's belly has expanded, they'll no doubt think that I'm the father. Which is synonymous with saying that the people within this mansion will think of me as a lolicon who's made a move on Yuel.

"To put his hands on such a child, that Sage-sama is a deviant after all."

"I heard that he was the only one who was tempted by the succubus' childish body, and ever since then I've had my doubts..."

"Whenever we're serving him meals or cleaning the mansion, he always looks at our skirts with lascivious eyes. I knew he would do it eventually."

I can easily imagine the maids in the mansion coming forth one after another with testimonies like that. At this rate, the image of myself within the mansion that I've been carefully fostering, as at times the Great Sage of the Bible and at

times the kind guest who cheerfully treats their cuts and burns, will be utterly destroyed. The respectful and familiar existence I've built up with the maids will take a precipitous fall into being treated as a lolicon.

...At the very least, I can't allow Yuel to leave the room in her present maternity wear.

...If Yuel did happen to go outside the room, I won't be able to stay in this mansion anymore. Psychologically speaking.

"...Come to think of it, Saint-sama told me that she was about to build a mansion for Master, but would it be alright to ask them to make a shed for this child as well?"

As I'm contemplating, Yuel speaks up to me while lovingly rubbing her belly.

"A shed, huh.

...That's right, I'm going to be living there, and so will Ruruka, so we need to build a dwelling for the dragon too, huh..."

Just as Yuel says, under the saint's leadership, plans to build a mansion for me in this labyrinth city are currently underway. It seems that funds are being provided by the country and the Church of Medine; I've heard that construction has already started. It's most likely something like a portion of my reward for defeating the evil god. And some high-priced decorations and valuable magic tools have been arriving addressed to me. There were even some convenient-sounding magic tools such as one for recognition inhibition, which allows even a Sage whose face is well-known to naturally melt into the crowd.

...Although it's a pain that I'll probably be asked to have an audience with the king sooner or later.

Well, enough about that.

My new home will be built soon. It's a given that we'll need to build living quarters for the dragon there. Given how sensible the saint is, she likely included a living space for that dragon in her calculations, but she shouldn't be

aware that this dragon egg exists yet.

"That's right, I guess we'll just tell the saint that there might be two pet dragons instead?"

"Yes! Well then, I will go tell her right away!"

Then spontaneously, as if it were a matter of course, Yuel starts to leave the room. So naturally that it doesn't even occur to me to try and stop her until she opens the door.

"W-Wait, Yuel!"

I very nearly watch her leave since it was too natural, but I get her to stop at the last second. And yet if I stop her for no reason, Yuel will have her doubts.

"O-Oh yeah, Yuel, I have something to tell you! Right, the two of us, in private... c'mere, next to me... come sit over here on this bed and let's talk!"

I come up with a fitting excuse, and call Yuel back.

"...!? Y-Yes, Master!"

When she hears my words, Yuel happily returns to the center of the room. Holding her heavy-looking belly, she maneuvers right up next to me, and plops down onto the bed.

...I somehow managed to stop Yuel. Now all I have to do is come up with a suitable justification for why she can't leave the room in her maternity getup. Well, that part may be difficult, though. From now on I have to work out a good idea that will conveniently keep Yuel from going outside in her maternity outfit without hurting her feelings.

Then, the instant I begin to think about a pretext that Yuel would be likely to accept.

"...?"

I notice that Yuel's attention isn't directed towards me, but somewhere else. Her gaze is on the half-open door that she left ajar a moment ago. And then I realize.

—That half-open door. Through the gap in it... I can see maid clothes.

"May I help you?"

Yuel calls out towards the half-open door. I sense a nuance of "you've been standing in front of the room for a while now but why haven't you come in?" in her words.

"U-Umm, esteemed attendant, as we were asked to provide garments for you, we thought it only proper to confirm that the size and fit are to your liking... um..."

In response to Yuel's voice, the door slowly opens to reveal three maids holding cloth and sewing tools.

And in the eyes of those maids is a look of shock at Yuel and I sitting next to each other on the bed. What has them shocked, you ask? That would no doubt be Yuel's bulging belly.

...Those maids have most likely come to visit this room for the express purpose of making adjustments to Yuel's clothes. And those maids had just arrived in front of the room at the same time that Yuel tried to leave. Does that mean the reason they didn't enter the room was because they were stunned from seeing this maternal Yuel? By some chance, my "I want to talk to you alone" which was meant to hold Yuel back might have ended up conveying a suggestive meaning to them. I was really only planning to invent some nonsense to confine Yuel to the room, though.

"Um, if no adjustments are necessary, we will be on our way..."

Then, perhaps out of consideration for Yuel and I having a private talk on the bed together, one of the maids brings that up.

"Y-Yeah, the size of the outfit was just right. Sorry for the sudden request. You were a big help."

"Master told me it looks great on me. Thank you very much for the clothes. I will treasure them!"

I reply to the maid, but she hasn't been looking at me since the beginning. She's not looking Yuel in the eyes either.

She's merely staring at Yuel's belly.

After staring at Yuel's stomach for a while, she timidly looks in my direction too.

...The look in her eyes is not one brimming with respect for the Sage-sama of the Bible. That look is shock and confusion. And then I notice a hint of disgust creep in.

No doubt about it, she's misunderstanding.

"Hey, about Sage-sama and that servant girl..."

"S-She *is* rubbing her belly quite lovingly..."

The other two maids keep sneakily whispering to each other. They're clearly curious about Yuel's stomach. Moreover, perhaps due to their excessive surprise, they aren't keeping the volume of their voices in check. I end up catching snippets of their conversation.

"N-No, she was normal when we saw her yesterday... and no matter how you look at it, that stomach... in just a single day..."

"Ah, really? That's true. That would be strange under any circumstances..."

But from listening to the two maids chatter, I realize.

—No matter how you look at it, it would be weird for Yuel's stomach to suddenly expand in a day or two. Rather than her being pregnant, ordinarily you'd just interpret it as her having something in her stomach.

...Maybe I've been overthinking things. If I just act confidently as usual, no matter how much of a maternal atmosphere Yuel is giving off, there's no way those around us will think that she's pregnant. Because from the perspective of the inhabitants of this mansion who see me and Yuel regularly, having Yuel's belly expand that rapidly wouldn't make any sense, rationally speaking.

"I-Is that so? How fortunate. Well then, please excuse us."

The maid I was speaking to seems to come to her senses as well and says that. After that, she bows her head low and departs from the room.

...But I wonder why, unlike the other maids, the maid who was talking to me

was giving me a look of disgust? Even though she should've figured it out right away with a little common sense. As I'm pondering, just across the wall, I hear the maids' voices.

"B-But, but y'know, it's Sage-sama we're talking about!? I didn't read anything about it in the Bible, but it did say he can use extraordinary magic that defies common sense... so maybe he can make a girl eight months pregnant in an instant too!?"

Like hell I can.



A few days later.

Sage-sama, whose existence defies common sense, can knock up a girl and make her 8 months pregnant in a single day.

Touching Sage-sama will make you pregnant.

He can put a baby in you just by looking into your eyes.

He's an outrageous lolicon.

Such rumors have begun to spread among a portion of the maids.

Using the recognition inhibition magic tool I received from the government, I make my escape from the lord's mansion with Yuel in tow.